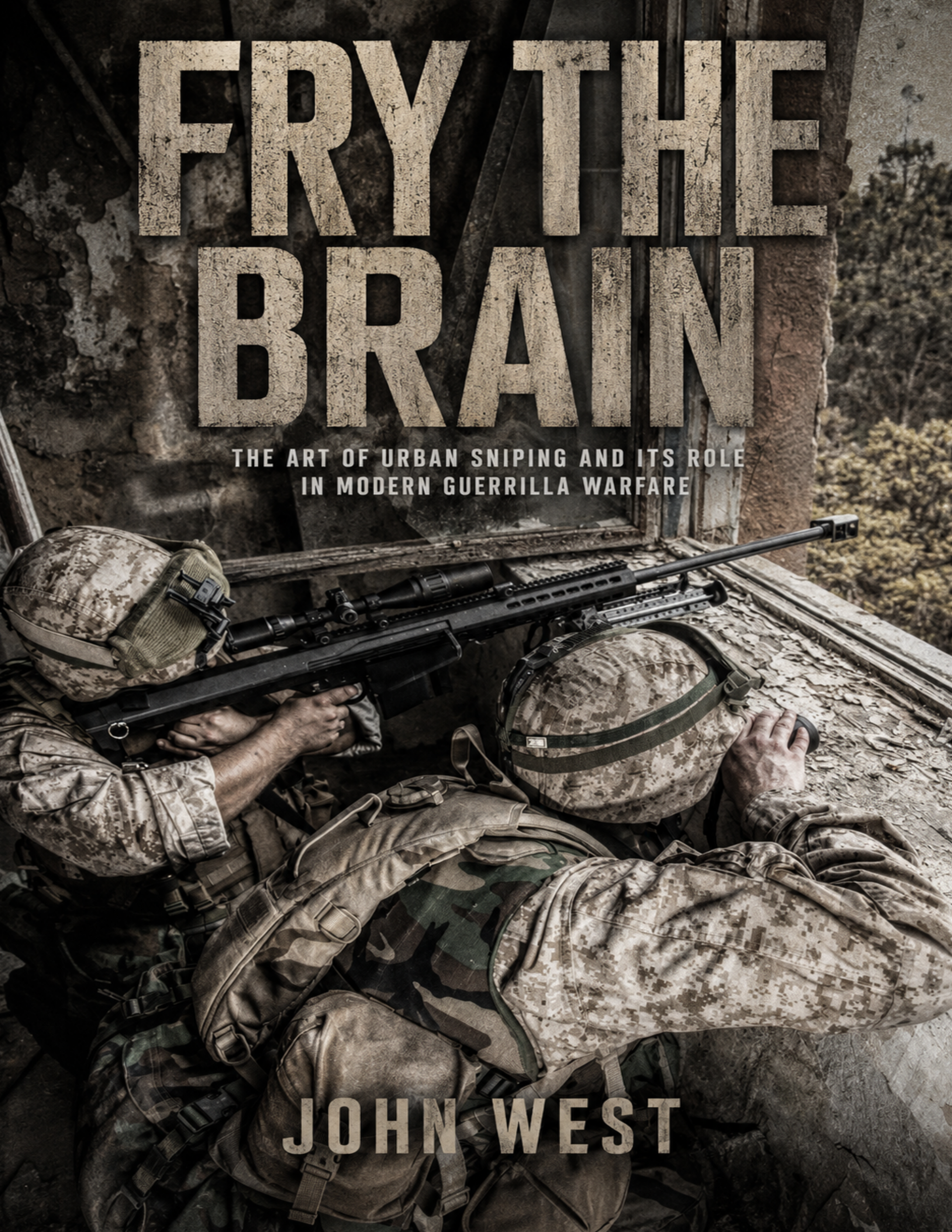
FRY THE BRAIN

THE ART OF URBAN SNIPING AND ITS ROLE IN MODERN GUERRILLA WARFARE



JOHN WEST

Fry The Brain

“When the Serbs failed in their attempt to overrun the neighborhood, they switched tactics to what they called “Fry the Brain,” a terror campaign meant to drive residents out. The Serbs shelled the area day and night, ringing the neighborhood with snipers, who killed everything they saw, especially women and children. They thought that killing kids would make the women, and ultimately the men, take flight.”

- John Falk, describing the Serbs’ sniper campaign against the people of Sarajevo in *Hello to all That*

Fry The Brain

The Art Of Urban Sniping And Its Role In Modern Guerrilla Warfare

Second Edition, Updated and Expanded

GW Strategies LLC (admin@gwstrategies.net)
Tucson, AZ
Front and back cover pictures from Shutterstock.
First edition published in 2008, second edition copyright @ 2025
by GW Strategies LLC. All rights reserved. This book may not be
reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form
(beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S.
Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press),
without written permission from the publisher.

Foreword

The year was 2005. I was in Baghdad. The sun was high above and there was a slight breeze. The merciless Iraq summer had not yet arrived and the weather was still mild. Our team was approaching an Iraqi military checkpoint. We had our identification cards out and our hands exposed, showing we were not a threat. Several Iraqi soldiers stood behind a row of dirt-filled protective barriers as they inspected us. Suddenly, a puff of earth erupted from a barrier, several inches from one of the soldiers.

“Sniper!” I called out.

“What are you talking about?” One of our teammates hadn’t seen the im- pact of the bullet and didn’t hear a thing.

“Naw, I saw it.” At least our driver confirmed I wasn’t crazy. Amazingly, the Iraqi soldiers remained oblivious to the danger, having missed the impact of the round, although the incoming bullet landed only inches from one of their men. Had the shooter calculated their shot just a fraction of an inch better, one of the soldiers would have been dead with a bullet in their chest.

We were in a slight dilemma. If we sped past the guards, they might open fire on us, thinking we were Al-Qaeda or a car bomb. We were trapped and had to act normally. So, we cautiously eased our vehicles through the checkpoint, hoping the sniper wouldn’t take another shot. We quickly drove behind the cover of a nearby building. We got out of our cars and discretely surveyed the surrounding urban terrain. There were hundreds of places the sniper could have fired from. And the shooter either used a sound suppressor or shot from within an enclosed space that muffled the gunshot. That’s why we didn’t hear it. We had no chance of finding the sniper, who was probably gone by the time we parked. Was this the work of the infamous Baghdad Sniper called Juba? We’ll never know.

We explained to the Iraqi soldiers that they were just shot at by a sniper, but they didn’t believe us. We advised them to build a better checkpoint that screened them from potential snipers. They never did. They remained victims waiting to happen.

That was my introduction to the art of urban guerrilla sniping. The shooter displayed superior snipercraft and we had no hope of catching them in the act. I felt helpless. I also felt a little sick knowing that my teammates or I could have had their heads blown off by an invisible marksman and we would have been powerless to stop it. That incident drove me to learn more about sniping and urban guerrilla warfare. It took me several years, but this book is my response to that day when a hidden guerrilla sniper had us in his cross hairs but missed.

From personal experience and research, it is obvious that despite the general consensus that guerrilla wars are the "wars of the future", little is actually known about the specific methodology guerrilla organizations use to wage these wars. Experts in the field – and even the soldiers themselves – generally don't understand guerrilla warfare because they are trapped in a world dominated by conventional militaries and their conventionally minded leaders. In the arena of military thought, the mind has become a prison. Because modern armies have invested so dearly in traditional concepts of warfare, from costly aircraft carriers to the latest main battle tanks, when they encounter a situation that does not fit their inflexible paradigms, they fall short.

For example, Great Britain fought the Germans to a standstill in the trenches of World War I and then helped win World War II. While there is no questioning the prowess of the British Navy or the skill of the Royal Air Force, how did England's war machine fare in Northern Ireland against the Irish Republican Army? During The Troubles, England fought a thirty-year war against a microscopic guerrilla movement that relied on kidnappings, drive-by shootings, and ski-mask wearing snipers. This bitter war only ended in 1998 after the leader of the IRA, Gerry Adams, became an elected member of Parliament.

We can also look at the Soviet Union who wallowed in Afghanistan for a decade, from 1979 to 1989, unable to defeat a guerrilla movement of unsophisticated tribesman. Then, in 1994, Russia found itself stuck in the mean streets of Grozny, suffering severe losses from Chechen snipers. In another example, the U.S. military failed after ten years of guerrilla warfare in the steaming jungles of

Vietnam. Then, two and a half decades after the last helicopter limped out of Saigon, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, quickly ejecting the Taliban from power in 2001. Twenty years later, the U.S. was humbled again after it withdrew from the country and the Afghan National Security Forces crumbled in mere weeks.

In these examples, we see conventionally built armies fighting unconventional enemies who refuse to follow the rules. In an increasingly urbanized world, militaries must be prepared to fight in major cities occupied by millions of inhabitants. Modern armies must accept an age where limiting infrastructure damage and preventing civilian casualties is just as important as engaging the enemy in combat.

While conventional armies try to maneuver their massive forces within the tight confines of places like Belfast, Beirut, and Baghdad, the guerrilla takes a different tact. Successful guerrilla movements embrace the urban terrain, manipulating the infrastructure and population to their advantage, fighting their clumsy enemies with deception, cunning, and precision. The embodiment of this urban guerrilla warfare is the sniper, a lone individual who moves among the people. They are a fighter that uses the city to their advantage, takes their shot under the noses of their enemy, and disappears into the population. The sniper is a precision tool, a scalpel the guerrillas wield to surgically target specific individuals with absolutely no collateral damage – either structural or human.

Resistance movements of all shades and stripes have employed the guerrilla sniper, from black pajama-clad Viet Cong fighters to the ragtag Somali militias in war-torn Mogadishu. From the perspective of the guerrilla, it is only natural. What better way to bloody a superior force than with an elusive shooter who takes a single shot and then melts away as quickly as they appear? The lone shooter is the hallmark of modern urban guerrilla warfare. While the world’s many resistance movements employ a variety of tactics like car bomb attacks, IED ambushes, and martyr operations, they all employ a universal weapon – the guerrilla sniper.

Fry The Brain peers into this murky world of urban guerrilla sniping to understand this little known or appreciated discipline. In doing so, *Fry The Brain* strives to educate the reader on all aspects of urban guerrilla sniping, from training and equipping the guerrilla sniper to actual employment in the world's recent urban battle zones. The trained urban guerrilla sniper can be a formidable foe that exacts a fearsome toll from the unprepared. Truly, one must understand their enemy in order to defeat them. Taken in that vein, this work is a counter-sniper manual.

However, *Fry The Brain* is more than that. While the book discusses in extreme detail how guerrilla snipers operate, the basic methodology they employ is the same as used by other elements of a guerrilla movement, like Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and suicide bomber cells. If one understands how a sniper cell works, one also understands how the other components of the guerrilla machinery work. Importantly, *Fry The Brain* is a study of modern urban guerrilla warfare. As the world becomes increasingly urbanized, so will the world's never-ending cycle of conflicts that are exhibited in the form of insurgencies, terrorism, and guerrilla warfare.

There is something in *Fry The Brain* for a variety of readers, from sniping fanatics and guerrilla warfare experts to casual readers and military history buffs. I have tried to entertain while educating, which is always a difficult task. In the end, I am confident the reader will come away with a richer understanding of the subject when they turn the final page.

Chapter 1

Sniper at Work

Belfast, Before the 1998 Good Friday Peace Agreement

Kill a British soldier or policeman. Gerry' instructions were clear. The orders originated from the senior leadership of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) who felt the British government was not taking the current peace negotiations seriously. They intended to change this. Consequently, the PIRA leadership sent a message to the Belfast leadership: increase the pressure on the illegal occupation forces - now.

Until recently, the Belfast brigade had been lying low, recovering from a string of successful British raids based on intelligence from 'touts' - what the despised PIRA turncoats were called. The Belfast men had been focused on fixing their security problem and training new PIRA units. However, they were still ready to act as they had just finished training a new urban sniper cell. Gerry, the leader of this cell, got the or- der over a pint of Guinness in a smoke-filled pub. All it took was a single sentence uttered in between swigs of ale - the boss wants the Brits to feel some pain - and a death warrant was issued. That was it. No written orders. No drawn out moral discussions. Combat action had just been authorized, as if they were talking about organizing a late tackle in a rugby match. And Gerry's superiors didn't want to know the details; they just wanted to see results. That's what the word "compartmentalization" meant. There would be no evidence linking the PIRA leadership to the trigger man. Gerry got paid to make it happen. It would take him several days to look over the intelligence reports and pick the right target, but in a week he would be ready.

Several years ago, Gerry had cut his teeth in the PIRA with the Goldfinger sniper crew that worked the rural South Armagh area. After serving the Republican cause faithfully since his initial membership and learning to keep his mouth shut, he had risen through the ranks. Gerry had his own crew now and he had new ideas of how to use them. Gerry wanted to bring his sniper war to the city. Even though his sniper cell was composed mostly of PIRA veterans, this would be their first operation as a team.

Eight Days later, Friday afternoon, 1:50 p.m.

Brrrrrrrrring! Brrrrrrrrrrring! Brrrrrrrrring!

"Yeah, I'll be there already!" Mike said to himself as he hurried out of the garage and picked up the phone with his greasy hands, which was now all over the phone.

"Yeah?" Mike barked, unsuccessfully trying to hide his annoyance, wiping his hands on his jeans.

"Hello, is Mike there?"

"This is Mike."

"Are you free for a pint of ale, mate, down at Reilley's?" It took Mike a second to recognize the voice, a voice that sent a chill down his spine, as if a pitcher of ice-cold water had just been poured down his back.

"Just got done working on my car. Sounds good." He tried to sound like the conversation was absolutely meaningless to him, as if this was someone he talked to a thousand times before. But if the voice on the other end of the line could look into his stomach, it would see a bundle of knots caused by a cocktail of fear and adrenaline. It really didn't matter what Mike was doing. He'd have to cut short his project and get ready whether he wanted to or not. He could be in the middle of putting out a burning fire at his house and it wouldn't have mattered. The movement demanded dedication.

Minutes later, Shawn, Jimmy, and Tom all got the same phone call. An hour later, the group met at a pub, but it wasn't Reilley's. Reilley's was just the code word signaling they were meeting at a prearranged location. If the authorities were listening to their phone lines - which they always assumed - the police would have no idea where they were actually meeting. This was a standard security precaution for the cell.

3:00 p.m.

One after the other, Shawn, Mike, Tom, and Jimmy came in, saw Gerry sitting at a table in the back of the pub, and took a seat. They casually scanned the pub, taking stock of who was in it and what they were doing. Nothing unusual stuck out. The four men had never met each other before and the only familiar face was Gerry's. This was because the PIRA Active Service Units (ASUs) were designed in a compartmented manner so the risk of compromise was minimized. Often, different members of an

ASU didn't know who the other members were until they met for an operation. After some small talk, Gerry got down to business.

"I'm glad everyone could make it. I assume you're all clean or you wouldn't be here."

Each member of the ASU had been trained months before in counter-surveillance measures at a PIRA safehouse in the northern city of Dundalk in the Irish Republic. They were taught to always take a route enabling them to determine if they were being

followed, such as switching from taxicabs to walking on foot. If they did detect surveillance, they didn't go to the meeting. It was a real pain in the ass to keep switching their routes, to keep looking at who was behind them, and to switch meeting places time and time again. But, as their instructors had reminded them, *it's a bit better than being in Long Kesh, isn't it?* Long Kesh was the maximum security prison where PIRA members were sent to do time.

Gerry, running his hands through his jet-black hair, continued, "It's such a nice day out, maybe we should go for a drive, eh?" It was posed as a question, but it was really an order. Gerry was in charge and they knew it. Now it was time to get down to the business at hand.

3:20 p.m.

The four left the pub and followed Gerry to a cream colored van parked out front. With Gerry driving, they departed, taking an unpredictable series of side streets and unlikely turns. The van was stolen the day before from an airport long-term parking lot by a separate PIRA unit specializing in obtaining vehicles for combat operations. Their intent was the van would be stolen, used for the operation, and then returned

before the owners knew their vehicle was gone. If anyone recognized the van during the operation and reported it to the authorities, the police would end up tracing it back to a completely innocent person. Since the PIRA had a contact working at the airport, it was easy to secure any vehicle they needed.

Once Gerry entered the specific western Belfast neighborhood he was looking for, the Ballymurphy Estate, he slowed down and pulled into an empty parking spot alongside the street. Stretched out on either side of them were long rows of two-story brick apartment buildings, all looking essentially the same. The neighborhood was poor, but clean. It was the same kind of urban shithole they all either grew up in or still

lived. They immediately grasped the key characteristics of the battlefield. Gerry kept the van running and began his brief.

“At the intersection in front of us, in two and a half hours, there will be a police patrol passing by. I’ll make sure the patrol stops. See that apartment on the corner with the green door? The back door is unlocked and there is parking in the rear. It’s been made available to us for the day.”

The others looked at the various landmarks as Gerry briefed them. They were all vaguely familiar with the area. In fact, Jimmy had a cousin who lived a couple blocks away.

“Questions?” Gerry asked. He knew there had to be. This was the first time they were all working together and all he had done so far was sketch out the basics of the operation.

“What kind of patrol is it? How many? What direction are they coming from?” Shawn asked. These were normal questions since he was the trigger man. Shawn tried to sound confident, masking his true nervousness. This was the first combat operation for Shawn. He was still a ‘virgin’ – what the PIRA called a new member with a clean record with the British authorities. This was precisely the reason he was picked to be a shooter, because he was off the police’s criminal radar and was still invisible. If he passed this first test, he would have a future with the organization. If he screwed up, he might be placed under suspicion and considered a possible infiltrator until proven otherwise. But that was the nature of the game he was now playing.

“From the south going north. That’s their normal pattern. The patrol consists of two Land Rovers. They usually pass by about six, give or take a few minutes.”

“Armored?” Mike wondered.

“Let’s assume so, yes.”

This meant a shot through the windshield or door was out. It would take a .50 caliber rifle to shoot through the armored glass and doors of the Land Rovers. It was too hard to hide and move such large sniper rifles in the city, so that option was out. They’d have to get the target out in the open.

“How good is the info?” Mike wanted to know.

“It’s good.” Gerry wasn’t going say much more about it. In fact, Gerry had no idea where the information came from. The Belfast chain of command provided him with several target packages and he chose this one. It was standard practice in the PIRA to separate their intelligence collection activities from the ASUs who acted on it. However, it was likely the PIRA unit that ran the local ‘neighborhood watch’ obtained the information from a housewife or local kids who played in the area. Since the PIRA had strong support in this neighborhood, there were half a dozen people who may have volunteered the information.

The van only idled in place for two minutes when Gerry pulled back into the street, taking a different route back to the pub. He stopped a mile short at a small parking lot near several shops.

“Mike, do you have any more questions?” Gerry asked. Although Shawn was the shooter, Mike would lead the tactical execution of the operation.

“No problem. I’ll figure it out,” Mike quipped.

“Okay.”

Gerry got out of the van and into a black, 500 series BMW and drove away. Gerry didn’t want to know any more about their plans. This was another deliberate measure to protect the ASU. The rest of the ASU had no idea how Gerry was going to stop the Land Rovers and they didn’t want to know. In turn, Gerry didn’t want to know anything about the execution of the operation. That way, if any of them were captured and interrogated, they only had a partial understanding of the overall plan. Gerry had already done a stint in the infamous Long Kesh prison in the H-Blocks (you could still see where his nose was broken from his ‘questioning’) and he knew the importance of security. He didn’t plan on going back anytime soon.

3:40 p.m.

Mike slid over into the driver's seat, lit a cigarette, and pulled into traffic.

"What kind of weapon do we have?" Mike said looking back at Shawn, blowing a thin column of smoke through his pursed lips and out the cracked window.

"AR-15 with scope and suppressor. I'm dialed in at two-hundred meters." This civilian version of the standard M-16 assault rifle was imported from Boston through the PIRA's support network so no one could trace it to a domestic purchase in any one of Northern Ireland's six counties. It was a "clean" gun.

"Who's shagging the rifle?" Mike asked.

"I am," Tom said, "It'll take me an hour to get it." Only Tom knew where the gun was hidden – another ASU security precaution.

"Right. Jimmy, I take it you're from around here?" Although the ASU members had all trained separately, they knew the standard sniper cell was composed of a team leader, a shooter, a quartermaster who provided the weapon and other materials, and a surveillance man. Process of elimination meant Jimmy was the surveillance specialist.

"Something like that," Jimmy smirked. It was none of their business where he was from. He knew the area and that was good enough.

"Jimmy, I want you to case the area an hour out and in the corner flat thirty minutes before the hit. Give me a heads up on anything unusual. Here's your cell phone and here's my cell phone number. As soon as it's done, leave out the back. Make sure you take care of the phone as soon as possible."

They were using cell phones procured by another team, pilfered earlier from some tourists staying at a local hotel. After the operation, they would give the phones to a courier who would take them to a supporter who worked at a coal-burning power plant and would incinerate the phones in the blast furnace - no questions asked. A lot of things disappeared in that blast furnace over the years, some mechanical, some human.

"Got it."

Mike pulled into the pub parking lot. Jimmy got out and walked off to hail a taxi. Jimmy knew his part of the plan and didn't need to know anything else.

“Tom, we’ll meet you in an hour and a half at the park in front of Hanrahan’s.”

“Right.”

Tom walked off to his car, which was parked several blocks away. He had the rifle stashed in the boot of a car (hidden where the spare tire was supposed to go) in a parking garage. The car was registered to someone who worked in England. The owner was a family friend and supported the movement. However, the owner had no knowledge of the weapon in their car because they were overseas six months at a time, doing agricultural contract work. In case the car was compromised, the owner could legitimately claim ignorance because of their long absences out of the country.

Mike flicked his cigarette out the window and turned to Shawn, “Let’s go in and have a pint. We have some time to kill.” They could both be dead or in prison an hour from now. Might as well go out feeling good. Plus, Mike could smell the fear oozing out of Shawn. His body chemistry screamed, *I’m scared to death because I’m about to do something crazy.* A police dog would have smelled Shawn a mile away. Yep, a big brown pint of Guinness was just what the Doctor ordered. It would calm the nerves. It always did.

5:11 p.m.

Mike and Shawn pulled up to the small park across from Hanrahan’s right on time. They were only sitting for about a minute when Tom pulled up. Tom got out of his car, opened the boot, and pulled out a bright, red cooler. Tom carried the plastic cooler to the van and heaved it through the side-door that Shawn had opened. The cooler creaked and moaned like an old woman as Tom set it down on the floor of the van. Once the gaudy cooler was in the van, Tom popped the top and pulled out an ice-cold Coke. He opened the can and took a long swig.

“Ahhhhhh!” Tom gave an exaggerated sigh after lowering the can. “Don’t drink and drive!” he warned. Tom could afford to be a smart-ass since his part of the job was half over. “I’ll service the drop off point fifteen minutes after the hit. Don’t be late.”

Tom described where to drop off the rifle, a place located just a few short miles from where the operation would occur. Tom got in his car and drove off, with Mike and Shawn a few seconds behind him. Mike and Shawn had about thirty minutes before they needed to be in position, giving them enough time to make another series of turns and switchbacks to see if they were being followed. If they detected anything suspicious, they simply wouldn't show up. The absence of any member of the ASU meant the operation was terminated, no questions asked.

5:30 p.m.

"Shawn, we're ten minutes out. We'll park at the street corner north of the intersection. It'll be a hundred and fifty meter shot."

As Mike spoke, Shawn put on a pair of white, latex surgical gloves, reached into the cooler, under the top layer of ice and sodas, and secured a disassembled AR-15 wrapped in a heavy plastic bag with two metal grommets at the top. Shawn had trained on this exact rifle one month ago on an isolated farm in the PIRA dominated county of South Armagh. He hadn't seen the rifle since because Tom was responsible for hiding and maintaining it. After unwrapping the weapon, Shawn slid the upper receiver onto the lower receiver and snapped the well-oiled retaining pins shut. Then, he inspected the four-power scope that was attached directly to the Weaver rail on top of the receiver. The scope was still taped with foam to protect it. Shawn spied a small bottle of water in the cooler, next to one of the sodas. Tom had thought of everything. Shawn removed a suppressor from the plastic bag and poured the water into it. He slowly rotated the suppressor around by the ends, making sure the suppressor was completely soaked inside. He poured the remaining water from the suppressor back into the cooler and attached the suppressor to the end of the rifle's barrel. This suppressor, like many modern ones, was a "wet" suppressor and was designed to have water poured in it to dampen the sound better.

Shawn kept the telescoping buttstock of the rifle as it was, all the way in, so he had more room to maneuver inside the restricted confines of the van. He pulled a twenty-round magazine from the bag, inserted it into the magazine well, and jacked a round into the chamber. He placed the rifle across the back seat and covered it with an old, green blanket with a pattern of pretty red roses sewn on it. It looked like something from a retirement home, like a blanket a grandmother would put over their old, cold legs. Shawn pulled the ‘cleaner’ bag from the cooler and took a quick accountability of its contents. He removed a light-weight, clear, plastic rain jacket, put it on over his black t-shirt, and zipped it up. It was one of those cheap ones you might buy at a concession stand at a football game.

Shawn picked up a black nylon balaclava and put it on over his head, covering up his curly blond hair, so just his blue eyes were visible. Then, over the balaclava went a woman’s nylon. One couldn’t do this job and be claustrophobic because the nylon smashed the balaclava into your face like someone was trying to smother you. The balaclava would hide his identity and the nylon served as a forensics barrier. His PIRA instructors in Dundalk hammered this into his head: *you can disguise yourself all day if you want, but if there’s gunpowder all in your hair when you’re done with the op, you’re fucked aren’t you?*

There was also a small rag and several alcohol wipes in the bag. Shawn was just finishing as Mike pulled up to the curb. Shawn had talked himself through the procedures ten times already so there was no way he was going to miss anything. *If you get sloppy, you get yourself caught or get yourself dead*. Shawn moved to the back of the van and slid open the rear window about two inches. The angle was perfect. Mike had eased the van into just the right position. Shawn just barely had a line of sight from the window to the intersection. A row of apartments blocked the rest of his vision and he knew the police patrol would only be able to see the rear of the van as they approached.

5:45 p.m.

Gerry’ gleaming, black BMW – it looked like it had just been waxed and polished by hand - drove slowly through the intersection, stopped briefly, and then sped off. Mike’s cell phone vibrated and he answered it.

“Hey, someone just dumped a body at the intersection. His legs are in the road.” It was Jimmy. He had a good view of the intersection as he peered through the drapes of the corner flat. The back door to the flat was unlocked just like Gerry said. It was obvious a family was living there, since there were a pile of dirty dishes in the sink. The owners were an Irish Republican family who supported the cause and were conveniently away for the day.

“Right,” Mike confirmed. He put his head over his right shoulder and hissed to Shawn between clenched teeth, “Do you see the action at the intersection?”

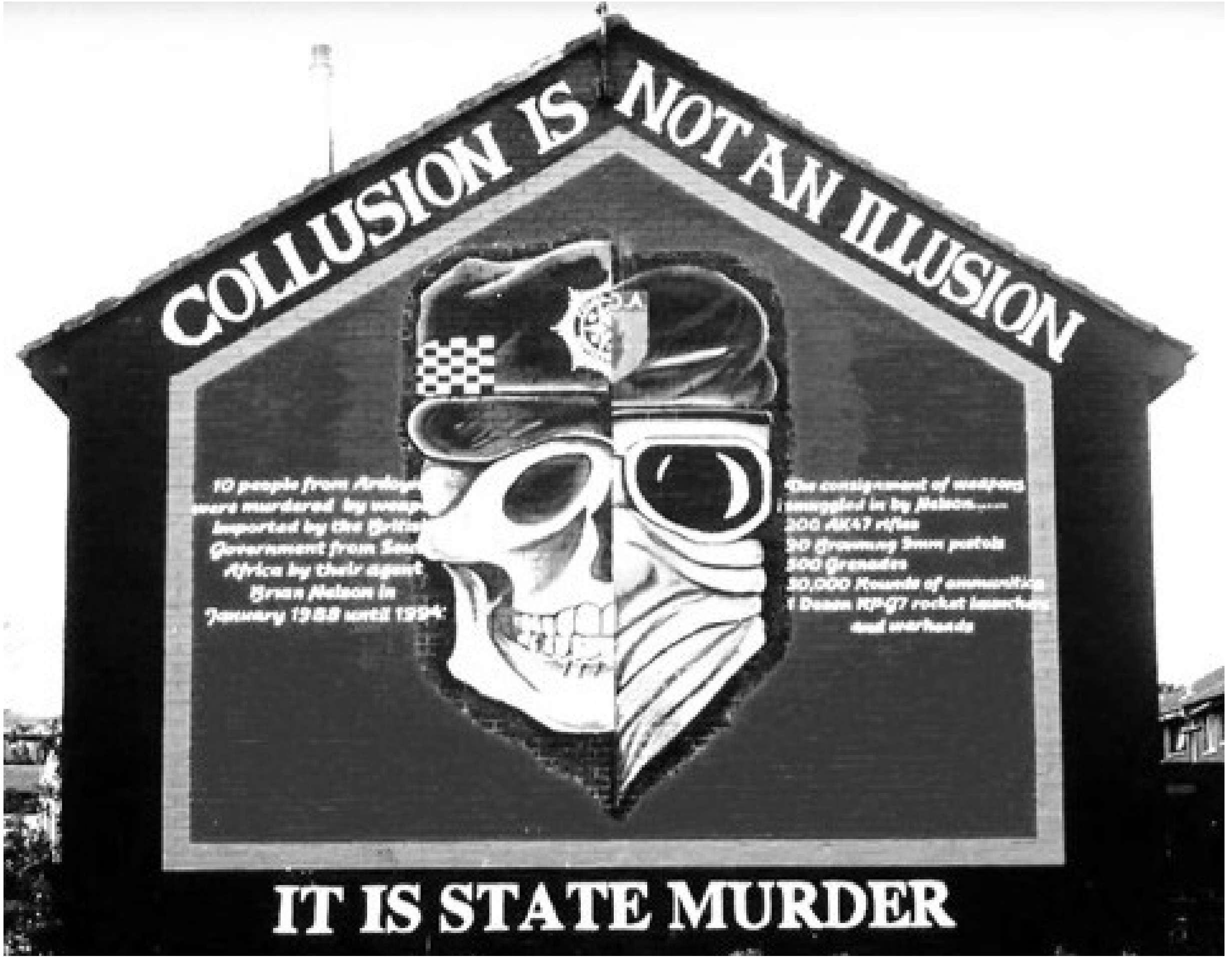
“Yep. A black BMW stopped and took off. He dumped something.” They were running ahead of schedule. Mike’s phone vibrated again.

“We’ve got two vehicles coming – Land Rovers. See ya’.” Jimmy’s job was done. He wanted to sprint to the car like madman, jumping down the brick stairs in a single leap like an Olympic hurdler, then tear open the driver side door, and burn rubber out of there like his life depended on it. But that’s not how you do it. That’s what idiots do who end up doing ten to life in Long Kesh. *You act like a chameleon, like everyone around you, like you’re going to walk the friggin’ dog.* Instead, Jimmy casually walked out the back door, down the stairs, and got into his car. He had given early warning of the arriving patrol like instructed. It was now up to the trigger man to do the rest. Jimmy was pulling away as the patrol arrived.

5:46 p.m.

The first Land Rover approached the intersection, slowed down, and came to a stop. The second vehicle stopped about fifty meters behind it. The occupants of the first vehicle were obviously looking at the body on the side of the road. A peeler got out of the passenger side of the lead vehicle, carefully scanning the area. A “peeler” was slang for a policeman. He was wearing black body armor over his smartly pressed uniform and carried an MP-5 submachine gun, his finger gently massaging the trigger. In the distance, several teen-age kids walked down a side street, kicking a soccer ball. Maybe these were “dickers” the policeman thought - kids used to scout operations for the PIRA. One could never really know.

One hundred meters up the main road a hand-painted mural was visible on the side of a building. White letters, a foot tall, screamed: COLLUSION! IT’S NOT AN ILLUSION! The mural was in reference to the PIRA’s long-held belief that the Royal Ulster Constabulary (the Northern Ireland police force) and the British military were working with Protestant paramilitary organizations, helping them to murder and terrorize innocent Catholics. Obviously, this wasn't a friendly Protestant Loyalist area. This was a hard-core Republican one. The policeman knew the PIRA frequently dumped the bodies of British informers so they could be easily found. This was done as a warning to others who might try and "grass" (inform) on the PIRA.


COLLUSION IS NOT AN ILLUSION
10 people from Ardoy
were murdered by weap
imported by the Britis
Government from Sou
Africa by their agent
Brian Nelson in
January 1988 until 1994
The consignment of weapons
smuggled in by Nelson.....
200 AK47 rifles
90 Browning 9mm pistols
500 Grenades
30,000 Rounds of ammunition
1 Dozen RPG7 rocket launchers
and warheads
IT IS STATE MURDER

This was nothing to get excited about. However, since the PIRA often booby-trapped these bodies, it was standard practice for a patrol to secure the immediate area and call in the bomb squad. Better to let the experts deal with the body instead of getting blown up over someone who was already dead. It was probably some low-life any ways who deserved what he got, an informant who worked both sides of the fence and finally got nailed by the Nutting Squad which was the PIRA's counterintelligence team who got rid of stool pigeons by putting a bullet in the back of their nut (their head).

5:47 p.m.

The muzzle of Shawn's dull-gray metal suppressor stuck out of the van's rear

window by an inch. Shawn wanted to make sure he was clear of the window, but he didn't want to give his position away. He had to squat down awkwardly to get a good position, because his six foot frame wasn't meant to fit in the family passenger van while standing up. Shawn had the peeler in his sights as the man looked in his general direction. The peeler could see the rear of the van, but it didn't look any more suspicious than the scores of other vehicles parked on the same street. Shawn squeezed the trigger.

"Pfft!" The gas from the exploding gun powder rushed down the barrel, behind the rotating bullet, eventually getting caught in the internal baffles of the suppressor. By the time the gas exited the suppressor, it was muffled so much that the resulting gunshot sounded like a car door being shut. The policeman dropped to the ground, grabbing his lower stomach.

Shawn saw that the peeler was wearing body armor and had aimed for his pelvis. He could have taken a chest shot, hoping the body armor was only soft armor designed to defeat handgun rounds. But, what if it was hard ceramic armor, which would stop his 5.56 mm rifle round easily? A chest shot was out. What about a head shot? What if he missed? The head was a small target to hit at this distance, especially with sweat running down your forehead and into your eyes, like God himself was trying to create every challenge possible so you couldn't make a successful shot. Shawn only had a second to decide and he made the choice to go for the pelvis, hoping to hit an artery or at least the intestines. He knew this was the right answer. His instructors had been in the same situation before. *It's called a body armor drill, men. You have no idea what kind of armor they have on at a distance and at more than a hundred meters, the head is a difficult target. So, you go for the largest, unprotected area on the body – the abdomen. You shoot 'em in the dick.*

5:48 p.m.

"We're good!" Shawn called out, his heart pounding so loud in his ears he couldn't tell if he said it normally or screamed at the top of his lungs. All he wanted to do was get the hell out of there and begin the counter-forensics process. They didn't have much time. Mike started the van and pulled away, like a crocodile easing back into the waters, its job on land done. Shawn immediately began wiping down the rifle with the rag, wiping clean any fingerprints and most of the gunshot residue. He dropped the magazine, jacked the live round out of the chamber, removed the suppressor, and broke down the AR-15 into the upper and lower receivers. Shawn put the rifle back into the plastic bag and re-padded the scope. He took a section from a metal coat hangar, ran it through the metal grommets at the top of the bag, and twisted the hangar so the bag wouldn't slide off.

Next, he took off the plastic rain jacket, the nylons, the balaclava - *you can disguise yourself all day if you want, but if there's gunpowder all in your hair when you're done with the op, you're fucked aren't you?* - then the gloves, and stuffed them in their plastic bag. He opened the alcohol wipes and cleaned his forehead, face, neck, and hands to get rid of the bulk of the gunshot residue. He knew this wouldn't pass close scrutiny, but it would remove enough residue to create doubt in the legal system. Maybe you got all the ingredients of gunpowder on your hands from painting your fence earlier today. After all, the key identifying elements found in gunpowder are also found in common house paint. Shawn even had some white paint on his fingernails from working with his paint brush that morning. For the last stage of the clean-up, Shawn took several cue-tips and cleaned out his ears and nostrils. Even in these hard to get places, incriminating gunshot residue could settle.

When Shawn went for his initial training at the PIRA safehouse in Dundalk, one of the first classes he received was how to remove incriminating evidence like gunpowder residue, fingerprints, and even fibers from his clothing. Since the British had such a strong forensic capability, every ASU incorporated a counter-forensic cleaning stage into their operations. After Shawn thought he was relatively clean, he put the wipes in the same bag as the jacket and gloves. Shawn then buried the plastic-wrapped rifle back under the ice and began looking for the expended shell. It took a few seconds, but he found it on the floor. Since Gerry continued to make unexpected turns in order to lose anyone who might try and follow them, Shawn lurched all over the back of the van like pinball until he finally secured the lone casing. He picked it up with his shirt and dropped it in the cleaner bag and put the bag under the sodas.

6:00 p.m.

Shawn had just completed the cleaning process when Mike turned a corner and pulled up next to a sidewalk. Adjacent to the sidewalk was a gray metal grate for rainwater to drain into. There were several plastic garbage cans lining the sidewalk, right in front of the grate. As soon as the van came to a halt, Shawn slid open the side door about a foot. The garbage cans provided an effective screen, blocking the view of anyone who might be watching. Shawn lowered the plastic bag and the rifle through the grate, hanging the bag on one of the metal bars with the coat hanger. Shawn slid the door shut and Mike pulled away.

The grate was the drop off point Tom directed them to go to after the operation. Tom didn't want them going directly back to him with the weapon. The goal after any operation was to immediately disassociate oneself from the physical evidence connecting one to the activity. This way, Tom could watch the drop-off point and make sure Mike and Shawn weren't followed. When all was clear and it was a little darker, Tom would drive up to the grate and retrieve the rifle. Once Tom secured the weapon, he would clean it and return it to its hiding place. After two or three more sniping operations, Tom would change out the upper receiver with a new one. The old upper receiver would then be taken to a machine-shop and the barrel drilled out, removing all the lands and grooves in the barrel. This way, the old incriminating barrel, which could be ballistically linked to the rifle and the shootings, would be removed from circulation and forensically sterilized. Then, Shawn would have to re-zero on the new receiver.

It was a warm summer evening and Shawn's shirt was soaked in sweat. If he had stepped into a shower for a full minute, he would have been drier. He had just seriously wounded a man, maybe even taken his life. A perfect stranger who was doing nothing more than his job was gunned down and Shawn pulled the trigger. While you're sighting in on a human for the first time its almost surreal, like it's not even you doing it. You’re floating in the sky, looking down, watching someone else named Shawn pull the trigger. Taking the shot was easy. Thinking about it later was something different. *You just killed a man, Shawn. You’re a killer. A wanted man. You’ll be on death row someday when they catch you. If they catch you.* The operation drained him mentally. He was glad it was over. Mike dropped Shawn off halfway to the pub so he could take a cab home.

“Good job, mate. Really good. Gerry is gonna’ like your work.” Mike had been in Shawn’s shoes before. He worked as a trigger man until he moved up the ranks. It didn’t matter how tough you were, or how tough you thought you were, the first time always weighed on you. Every man you killed, you carried on your back for the rest of your life. After a few more shootings, Shawn would get calloused like the rest of them. In another year, shooting a peeler would be just like shooting an inanimate object, like shooting a scarecrow. It wouldn’t mean a thing.

Shawn managed a weak smile and a shrug and walked off to hail a cab. As soon as he got home, Shawn would take a long shower, being sure to thoroughly clean any remaining gunshot residue from his body. He would also burn his clothes in the chimney, eliminating any forensic link connecting the shooting to him. Then, he would throw up, heaving until it seemed his guts would fall out.

6:12 p.m.

Mike pulled into the original pub parking lot, put the keys under the driver’s seat, and walked off. Half an hour later, a PIRA ‘cleaning crew’ arrived and took the van directly to a nearby warehouse in the industrial district where rows of near-identical, pre-fab, rusted buildings dotted the landscape. In the warehouse, the cooler was removed and the clothing bag and its contents were burned later that day at the coal plant. The cleaning crew wiped down the entire vehicle to remove any fingerprints, even though everyone in the ASU had been instructed not to leave any. It was better to be safe than in prison and under interrogation. The cleaning crew also vacuumed the seats and floor carpet, sucking up any trace fibers. After the van was cleaned inside and out, which took about thirty minutes, the cleaners brought the van back to the airport parking lot where it was stolen. With any luck, the family wouldn't even know the vehicle was borrowed for the day.

Mike was home before the cleaning crew arrived. He took a long shower even though he never touched the weapon. There still might be some gunpowder particles that were transferred onto him. Stranger things had happened. They all wore blue jeans during the operation because blue denim fibers were was so common in Northern Ireland they were forensically useless. Also, all their t-shirts were nylon soccer shirts, which shed relatively few fibers. Gerry was dead serious about limiting fiber transfers during operations, even though it was a tedious chore for everyone involved. *Let 'em bitch about it all they want. I'm not going back to the H-Blocks.* The Maze Prison was referred to as the H blocks because, from the sky, the layout of the buildings looked like a giant letter H.

Gerry would get in touch with him in a week or so. He just had to lay low until then. The entire ASU would know the results of their operation the following morning when the headlines inevitably screamed, "IRA TERRORISTS SUSPECTED IN SHOOTING OF POLICE." The article might even disclose the name of the officer, the unit he served with, what town he was from, and the exact nature of his injuries. If he was dead, the paper may even say where the funeral was being held. Maybe they could get more officers of the Royal Ulster Constabulary at the funeral with a drive-by. The newspapers usually provided the best post-operation review.

If this operation proved to be successful, Gerry would get another order to conduct another operation. The PIRA needed to step up the tempo in the cities. The British would be forced to the negotiating table - at gunpoint if necessary. If Gerry and his ASU could provide the steady stream of casualties the Republican movement demanded, there was plenty of work for them.

Chapter 2

Urban Guerrilla Sniping

Shooting and marksmanship are the urban guerrilla's water and air. His perfection of the art of shooting makes him a special type of urban guerrilla – that is, a sniper a category of solitary combatant indispensable in isolated actions. The sniper knows how to shoot, at close range and at long range, and his arms are appropriate for either type of shooting.

- Carlos Marighella, author of "Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla"

Why Urban Guerrilla Sniping?

In January 2000, a Chechen sniper shot a Russian major-general as he inspected his front lines in Grozny. In March 2006, Iraqi insurgents shot and killed the Iraqi military's most competent general as he drove in downtown Baghdad. And in February 2022, a Ukrainian sniper killed Russian Major General Sukhovetsky as he led his forces at Hostomel Airport. This ability to remove specific, influential personalities underlines one of the sniper's best characteristics: the ability to discriminate. Because military actions in a guerrilla war are unavoidably linked to public perception and government legitimacy, the ability to limit structural damage and civilian casualties is crucial. A lone sniper can assure that they destroy a specific target without harming bystanders.

The guerrilla sniper's ability to avoid collateral damage can be used to exploit the government's own inability to do the same. If government security forces are unable to detect and selectively eliminate the guerrilla sniper, these security forces often resort to massive, indiscriminate firepower to silence the shooter. As a result, if a guerrilla sniper fires from amongst the population, they can often bait security forces into butchering the population with a massive response. This overreaction in turn provides ammunition for the guerrillas' information war and undermines the legitimacy of the government.

Overreaction and clumsy massacres are one kind of reaction from enemy security forces, but so is organizational paralysis. A skilled guerrilla sniper, relentlessly working a specific geographic area, picking off targets regardless of government security measures, is a powerful tool. In this manner, the unseen sniper, selectively killing their prey and getting away with it every time, creates bone-gnawing fear and can freeze the targeted unit.

by K. Snow

Fallujah, Iraq, 2004. 1st Infantry Division soldiers take cover inside a building after taking enemy sniper fire.

Guerrilla snipers are also a viable means for attrition warfare, steadily picking off security forces one by one, raising the body count to an intolerable political level. Chechen guerrillas fully embraced this form of attrition warfare through their widespread use of snipers, which was one of the number one killers of Russian soldiers in that war. In turn, Iraqi insurgents understood the political importance of attrition warfare, using their own snipers to raise the American body count. Both Chechen and Iraqi guerrillas calculated that a steady stream of casualties would eventually become politically unpalatable to the Russian and American publics.

At the tactical level, snipers perform a variety of functions, and for a guerrilla force, pinning down the enemy’s superior forces is a vital task. The Chechens expertly used snipers to slow down vastly superior enemy forces, causing Russian forces to bog down in the streets of Grozny as the dead piled up. Serbian snipers, taking careful aim at surrounded Sarajevo, paralyzed entire sections of the city, forcing thousands of people to hide inside their homes and stay off the streets. A single sniper team in Fallujah, Iraq, rumored to be Chechen, was able to pin down an entire American infantry company all day during the November 2004 assault on the city. As these examples show, a single sniper enables the guerrillas to economize their force and expend only one man for disproportionate results.

Another use for the lone sniper is creating terror. German snipers on the Eastern Front, confronted with massive human wave attacks by the surging Russians, learned to inflict horrible wounds on the advancing Soviet soldiers by blasting gaping holes in their intestines with explosive bullets. These strategically placed shots reduced the Russians to screaming masses of bleeding flesh incapable of continuing the fight. This calculated use of battlefield terror enabled the Germans to repeatedly beat back human wave attacks, buying themselves much needed time.

While tactical terror on the battlefield is within the reach of the individual sniper, so is the application of widespread terror against the civilian populace. The ugly civil war in Bosnia during the 1990’s introduced the widespread use of urban snipers to instill terror in competing populations. Every day, Serbian snipers butchered their opposites, preying on old men, women, and young children. In this war, snipers were used as an ethnic cleansing tool rather than a discriminating battlefield weapon. And long before Bosnia, American mass murderer Charles Whitman, firing from the lofty heights of the Texas Tower in 1966, showed the world that the lone sniper in a densely populated area was just as deadly as a homicide bomber.

For all these reasons, resistance movements employ the urban guerrilla sniper. While the guerrilla understands their own tactics, conventional security forces have either been slow to figure out their enemy’s slippery methodology or simply never do. To connect the dots of the urban sniper one must first realize it is the guerrilla’s unconventional tactics that make them effective, not their exceptional shooting ability. To focus on the guerrilla’s technical shooting skill, as traditional snipers do, is to miss entirely the power of the urban guerrilla sniper.

Taking Aim at Conventional Sniping

The previous chapter demonstrates that urban guerrilla sniping is a drastic departure from traditional concepts of sniping. In fact, traditional sniper methodology falls flat in the arena of urban guerrilla warfare for a variety of reasons we will discuss. In spite of the very real limitations of traditional sniping, conventional concepts still dominate the field. As a result, much less is known about the discipline of urban guerrilla sniping, despite thousands of soldiers, policemen, and civilians shot by snipers during the course of the world's guerrilla wars.

If we are to understand the art of guerrilla sniping, we must first strip away the decades of misconceptions about what a sniper actually is. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the act of sniping as, "to shoot at exposed individuals from a usually concealed point of vantage." This bare-bones description is good because it is broad enough to incorporate a range of styles and methods of sniping. In contrast, many have whittled down their definition of a sniper to such a narrow concept that only traditional styles of sniping are recognized.

For these sniper purists, their claustrophobic definition of a sniper is a young, fit male, who is a school-trained professional, inevitably wears a camouflaged Ghillie Suit, has a high-powered rifle and an equally high-powered scope, and fires from extreme distances. This concept is a reflection of a conventional, rural-centric mindset that works in a specific kind of high-intensity warfare environment. The urban guerrilla sniping realities are something different.

A conventional sniper in a Ghillie Suit.

Photo by CPL Storm

The School-Trained Sniper Myth

A person formally educated in their field usually has an advantage over someone with no organized learning in this same field, but this is not always true. In fact, some of the world's best snipers are self-taught. Case in point: Vassili Zaitsev of Stalingrad fame started his career as a Navy payroll clerk, becoming a self-taught sniper as he fought the German Sixth Army on the banks of the Volga River in the fall of 1942. Sepp Allerberger, the second-most prolific German sniper of World War II, with hundreds of rigorously confirmed kills, learned to shoot on his own with a captured Russian rifle while convalescing at an aid station. Zaitsev and Allerberger were both excellent snipers because they understood the tactics of sniping, not because they were school-trained experts. In a similar vein, a guerrilla sniper's training methodology may be scoffed at by professional snipers, but just because their learning process is different does not make them any less deadly.

The Ghillie Suit Myth

The Ghillie Suit is a rural-centric camouflage method that constrains a sniper to a specific environment – it only works in the woods. A sniper in a Ghillie Suit stands out in an urban environment as opposed to blending into it. For example, Urban sniper/mass murderer Charles Whitman calmly walked to the observation deck of the Texas Tower in Austin, Texas on August 1, 1966, wearing a pair of coveralls. To the surrounding people he looked like a janitor. Whitman certainly could not have driven on campus with his face painted green and wearing olive drab netting sewn to an old uniform. In the cities, camouflage may be a pair of jeans and a leather jacket.

The High-Powered Rifle Myth

A high-powered rifle is not required for effective sniping, especially in an urban environment where a long-barreled, bulky weapon is more of a liability than an asset. In Chechnya, guerrillas were successful at killing Russian soldiers with head shots fired from .22 caliber rifles. These .22 caliber rifles were light, quiet, maneuverable, easily concealed, and if a sniper hit a person in the head with a .22 caliber bullet, they were just as dead as if they were shot with a .50 caliber rifle. Also, Israeli soldiers found the .22 caliber rifle particularly useful for putting down select targets during riots and demonstrations. Others still, from common criminals to guerrillas fighting the Third Reich, employed pistols as a sniping tool.

The High-Powered Scope Myth

A high-powered scope is not a requirement for effective sniping. Simo Hayha, the most successful sniper of all times, was a Finnish soldier credited with killing 542 Russian soldiers over the course of only three months, during the Russo-Finish War in 1940. During this time, Simo killed six Russians a day until he was wounded by a bullet to the face. Simo did not use a scope on his Finnish M28 7.62 mm, bolt-action rifle (this was essentially a copy of the Russians' own Mosin-Nagant battle rifle) because he created too great a silhouette when he raised his head to look through a scope. As a result, the world's most prolific sniper scored all of his kills over iron sights.

The Long Distance Myth

As mentioned already, urban combat ranges are frequently much less than those found in a rural setting. In many situations, soldiers are so close to their enemy they cannot take a long distance shot even if they wanted to. In Grozny, Chechen fighters clung so tightly to their vastly superior Russian foe that subsequent gun battles were fought entirely by shooting through the walls and ceilings of adjacent rooms. Also, some Iraqi insurgent snipers have made their shots from as close as fifty meters.

The Male Sniper Myth

Because organized warfare is a male-dominated endeavor, snipers are expected to be men. However, one’s gender has nothing to do with the ability to be an effective sniper. In World War II, the Russians employed entire sniper companies composed of women - not only because they were desperate for recruits, but because they were good snipers. In the world of guerrilla warfare, the sex of the sniper can be critical. Since being male makes up part of an expected sniper’s profile, deviations from this profile help a guerrilla to remain free from security force scrutiny. Women all over the world receive less scrutiny from security forces and the general public than do men, enabling them to move more easily in government controlled areas. To this end, the Bosnians in Sarajevo and the guerrillas in Chechnya both used female snipers to good effect.

Simo Hayha

Finnish national hero, Simo Hayha, poses for the camera while holding an M28 rifle, a copy of the Russians' own Mosin-Nagant battle rifle. Hayha and other Finnish snipers used unconventional tactics to pick off the Russians' life essential field kitchens and to shoot the ill-clothed Russian soldiers as the huddled around their brightly burning campfires. Consequently, most Russians lived in fear of the Finnish 'White Death'. The Russians later said they captured just enough land in the war to bury their dead.

How is Guerrilla Sniping Different from Conventional Sniping?

Conventional and guerrilla snipers have much different lifestyles. While a conventional sniper operates from the security of being backed by the government, the guerrilla lives in an environment of perpetual insecurity.

An Anonymous Life

Life for the conventional sniper is simpler. The conventional sniper does not have to conceal their profession since they live and work in the open. For instance, any person interested in learning about sniping can contact world-renowned sniping expert John Plaster and talk to him in person. It is no secret where he lives, where he works, or what his email address is. In contrast, the guerrilla sniper must live a life of secrecy, never allowing the public to know their true discipline. While one can look up John Plaster's contact information in the phone book, there are no listings for "Guerrilla Snipers" in the

Grozny, Belfast, or Fallujah yellow pages. For the guerrilla sniper, exposure means death or imprisonment.

Freedom of Movement

Because they operate in the open, conventional military snipers have considerable freedom of movement. A Russian sniper could hop on the back of an armored vehicle and drive to any place they needed to in Chechnya. On the other hand, a guerrilla sniper has a limited ability to move because some areas are closed off to the public. The guerrilla sniper has to deal with checkpoints, random searches, nighttime raids, and trained guard dogs trying to sniff them out. Therefore, a large part of a guerrilla sniper's life is spent developing methods to bypass a security force's population control measures in order to remain anonymous and retain an acceptable level of movement.

Making the Shot

Making a shot for a member of a military organization or a police force is usually an overt act. This kind of overt sniper, because they have nothing to hide and are defending the established government, can take their shot in the open with few repercussions. Think of a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) sniper on duty at a police station in Northern Ireland. This sniper can openly look for IRA guerrillas with a pair of binoculars, and if they see an armed IRA gunman, they take a shot. After firing their weapon, the RUC sniper writes up an incident report and maybe gets an award several months later.

In contrast, everything the guerrilla does must be done in absolute secrecy. The guerrilla has to hide the fact they are going to take a shot, they must hide the shot itself, and they must hide the fact they just took a shot. Not only must the guerrilla hide these details from their enemy, but they must also hide them from the public. The guerrilla may even have to hide these events from their own organization and family to remain compartmentalized and thus secure. After the shot, the guerrilla may not have the luxury to stay around to make another shot. Instead, the guerrilla's primary goal is to immediately blend into the urban terrain and disappear.

Physical Association Between the Sniper and their Weapon

A professional sniper in the military or law enforcement takes immense pride in their weapon. They train with it for hours on the rifle range, they baby it with regular cleaning, and they keep it in a protective case. The conventional sniper not only takes pride in their weapon and their shooting skills, but they also make specific measures to associate themselves with their weapon. This association takes many forms like taking a picture of them holding their rifle, signing for their weapon by serial number on an official document, placing their name on their weapon (or placing a number on that weapon that is associated with their name), and keeping their weapon in an established arms room or in an elaborate gun case at their home.

This IRA member with an AR-18 must take measures to remain anonymous and disassociate themselves from the act of shooting and the weapon itself. Every aspect of their lives and operations must be grounded in identity security and counter-forensic tactics. They will need to conceal their activities from their own insurgent group and from their friends and families. This means they will lead a double life while they are in the movement.

In contrast, the guerrilla sniper pursues the complete opposite approach. In fact, they take extreme measures to disassociate themselves from their weapon. This disassociation is an integral part of the guerrilla's anonymous lifestyle. The disassociation measures the guerrilla may take include: wearing gloves so as not to leave incriminating fingerprints on the weapon, filing the serial number off their weapon, using a different weapon for each attack, hiding the weapon in a public place, securing the weapon only moments before the attack and then discarding it just as quickly, and cleaning gunshot residue off the weapon and the guerrilla's own person and clothes after making a shot.

Overall, the guerrilla sniper has a difficult task because they are burdened with conducting every aspect of their operation in complete secrecy. A guerrilla sniper who is an excellent shot at long distances, but is unable to effectively pass through government checkpoints, is useless. The guerrilla sniper must possess a variety of skills that go far beyond making a bullet hit its intended target, but that are as much a part of their job as squeezing the trigger. These skills include creating believable cover stories to deceive local authorities, blending in with the local population, conducting clandestine reconnaissance and surveillance of future targets while remaining undetected, moving to and from the guerrilla sniper's shooting platform while under direct observation by the enemy and the public yet arousing no suspicion, understanding the security forces' forensic methodology, and being educated in the loopholes of the government's legal system.

Understanding the Urban Environment

We know a guerrilla must operate differently than their government foe, but how exactly does the urban environment affect the sniper? To start, there are four distinct features of the urban environment one must appreciate: a large volume and variety of 1) people, 2) vehicles, 3) buildings, and 4) avenues of travel (roads, sidewalks, stairs, crosswalks, alleys). Unlike the relatively simple qualities of the rural world, the city is a complex place.

People

A large number of people living in confined spaces mean the sniper has to conduct their operations under the scrutiny of a diverse population that may or may not support the guerrilla's actions. To counter the scrutiny of so many people, the guerrilla sniper develops methods to conceal their weapon, to conceal their intentions, and to conceal the actual taking of their shot. Concealing all of these elements of their operation is difficult and requires a detailed methodology and strict discipline. On the other hand, the guerrilla sniper can also exploit the masses of people. This is because the sniper can move as one anonymous individual among many where the sheer volume of people makes it impossible for the human eye and brain to observe, pick out, and remember specific individuals.

Vehicles

Just as with mobs of people, the number and variety of vehicles in a city can be an asset for the sniper because they can hide in the sea of cars just as they disappear in an ocean of people. For example, a guerrilla sniper can be in a vehicle, surrounded by people, but at the same time be completely isolated from them. In this situation, the vehicle is its own microenvironment, providing complete concealment from the rest of the urban surroundings. Let us think of a sniper positioned in the back of a van, completely invisible to people standing even one foot from them. This relative isolation, provided by the completely enclosed space, allows the urban sniper to get close to enemy checkpoints, guard towers, and government facilities, and still remain undetected. A sniper has several options when using a vehicle. They can shoot from a parked vehicle, shoot from a temporarily halted vehicle, or even fire from a slow moving vehicle. As soon as the sniper takes their shot, the driver takes off and is miles away from the scene of the shooting in just minutes.

Buildings

The thousands of structures found in any large city offer the guerrilla sniper many platforms to shoot from. Buildings, which are their own completely enclosed microenvironments (just like vehicles), allow the guerrilla sniper to observe their target and make a shot completely isolated from the surrounding populace. The sniper can further manipulate the vast number of windows and doors in a specific area to confound enemy security forces. If the sniper fires from a complex urban area, security forces will have to search a thousand different windows, doors, and rooms in order to determine where the shot could have been made from – an arduous task indeed.

The Holiday Inn Beirut was used by all sides in the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) as a sniper platform due to its size, height and complexity. While the hotel was targeted with tank and artillery fire, the massive structure continued to stand. The building became part of the "Battle of Hotels" fought from 1975-1977 in the hotel district of downtown Beirut.

Avenues of Travel

The endless number of roads, exit and entrance ramps, bridges, crosswalks, stairs, crossroads, and intersections in a large city can be exploited by the guerrilla sniper in many ways. First, the sniper has many ways to approach a particular target. If a certain road is blocked off, the sniper can come in from another direction using any number of alternate roads. If cars are not allowed near the target, the sniper can approach their target on foot using sidewalks, back alleys, stairs, or other pedestrian means of travel.

The guerrilla sniper also has the opportunity to use the various avenues of movement in a city as obstacles to restrict their enemy and help their own getaway. For instance, a guerrilla sniper (like Charles McCoy, the infamous Ohio highway sniper who we will later discuss a little more in-depth) may shoot a target sitting in a car, who is stuck in traffic so they cannot drive away or even pursue the sniper after the attack. Or the sniper might engage a target walking on a bridge who is trapped by the concrete terrain and cannot physically escape from the kill zone.

Importantly, the city presents the guerrilla sniper with an endless array of options for escape. The sniper can incorporate various means of travel to confound pursuing forces like moving through alleys and shopping malls, taking taxi cabs, and switching out vehicles under bridges and in parking garages. An experienced urban sniper exploits not just avenues of travel, but all the different elements of the complex urban terrain - people, cars, and buildings - to overwhelm enemy security forces, make a shot, and secure an effective getaway.

Urban Complexities

How else does this complex urban environment affect the sniper? For one, the urban world is one of obstacles and a shooter will most likely have to fire through a variety of urban mediums such as car doors and windshields, windows and doors of structures, and body armor and helmets. Since these mediums are everywhere in a city, the sniper may need a weapon that can penetrate them. Because space is compressed in the cities, urban snipers may have to shoot from confined areas, such as from inside a vehicle, like the D.C. snipers who made their shots from the trunk of a Caprice Classic, four-door sedan. Consequently, the sniper may need a small maneuverable weapon to take advantage of all the unusual firing positions found in the city.

Additionally, the sniper’s target in a city may be very small, like the head of a person driving an armored vehicle, looking through a window, or peering through a jagged hole blown out of a wall. Targets wearing ceramic body armor and protective helmets make for a much smaller target because the sniper has to aim for other body parts like the face, the neck, the pelvis, the lower back, and the armpits. The urban sniper’s target could be very fleeting due to the many random elements and obstacles found in a city: a target could walk quickly past a window, stroll hurriedly through a doorway, run down a street, or a car could drive in between the sniper and the target, blocking their shot. As a result, the urban sniper must be able to rapidly acquire and engage their fleeting targets.

We must understand the urban sniper cannot hide in the woods or a clump of bushes to conceal themselves from the enemy and prepare for their shot. In the urban world, much different shooting platforms are required to be successful. In Northern Ireland, IRA snipers routinely conducted home invasions, taking over people’s residences and holding the owners temporary hostage while they used the house as a sniper platform. In Bosnia, competing snipers cut holes in the walls of abandoned high-rises, firing from these man-made rifle ports to pick off opposing populations.

Blending in with the Populace, Blending in with the Enemy

Perhaps the most important aspect that makes the guerrilla sniper such a frustrating foe is they intentionally blend in with the population. They do this by appearing as a normal citizen, wearing civilian clothes, concealing their weapon, and then taking a shot at an unsuspecting soldier or policeman. By definition, when the guerrilla sniper does this, they are committing a war crime. To be considered a lawful combatant, a guerrilla must wear a uniform visible at a distance, they must carry their weapons openly, they must have established leaders, and they must obey the laws of land warfare. But conforming to the above laws makes the guerrilla just like their conventional enemies, that is, an easily identified target. Since the urban guerrilla cannot successfully fight their enemy using these rules, they choose to break them. However, a guerrilla sniper can work around the laws of land warfare in order to remain a legal combatant and still be successful.

Warsaw Uprising, 1944. This Polish fighter is wearing German equipment and carrying a German Kar 98. The insurgents wore white armbands as their uniform.

by E. Haneman

Let us take a look at a hypothetical situation in Chechnya. An unarmed Chechen sniper in civilian clothes walks to a van and then get inside it. Could the sniper then take a colored cloth band out of their pocket, put it on their arm, pick up an SVD sniper rifle stashed inside the vehicle, shoot a Russian soldier, then stash their rifle and arm band, and get out of the van and walk away like nothing happened? Yes, they could - legally. It is legal because during the actual act of shooting they were wearing a recognized uniform, which (by law) can be nothing more than an arm band and at the time they were handling their weapon in the open. It is not the sniper's fault that the enemy cannot see their arm band or SVD while positioned inside the van. Sure, many countries, like Russia, would argue that such actions are illegal. However, ask them to show where it is written in the Geneva and Hague Conventions that the guerrilla sniper, in this situation, is violating the laws of war.

While the guerrilla sniper benefits from blending into the civilian population, they also benefit by mimicking their enemy by wearing captured or stolen uniforms. For example, resistance movements who fought against Nazi Germany during World War II mimicked their enemy by dressing as German soldiers. The French, Polish, Russian, and Yugoslav resistance movements all dressed as German soldiers to set up fake checkpoints, to move safely through enemy controlled areas, to execute ambushes, and to conduct surprise attacks. In later wars, Palestinian guerrillas mimicked their

Israeli foes, Chechen guerrillas wore Russian uniforms, and Iraqi insurgents donned both government police and army uniforms. Is a guerrilla sniper who wears their enemy's clothing committing a crime? Not necessarily.

According to the laws of land warfare, one can impersonate the enemy as long they don't fight while in the enemy's uniform. With this as a legal baseline, think of a Polish sniper fighting in Warsaw in 1944, walking openly down the street wearing a German uniform and carrying a Mauser K98 sniper rifle. Could this same guerrilla then walk into an abandoned building, go up the stairs to the top floor, put a colored arm band on their upper right arm and now be dressed in the proper uniform of their guerrilla army? Yes. Then, could the sniper take aim at a German soldier, blow their head off, put the colored arm band in their pocket, and walk back down the same street they came down? Yes, legally, they could do all of the above.

Traditional Sniping and the Law

While guerrilla snipers face a torrent of legal scrutiny from their conventional foes, let us examine traditional forms of sniping and see if they are themselves in compliance with international law. From at least the time of World War I, snipers in the world's major armies (British, French, American, German, Italian, Turkish, Russian) took extensive measures to disguise themselves, a process we know as camouflaging. However, by donning various camouflage outfits composed of anything from netting and cloth strips to real vegetation and hiding in fake trees, these snipers no longer wore a recognized uniform and they certainly could not be identified from a distance. In fact, the whole purpose of camouflaging was to be invisible to the enemy. Were these snipers violating the laws of land warfare? Defenders of camouflaging say it is not illegal to hide oneself as long as the sniper does not intentionally dress like a civilian. Others argue that as long as the sniper wears some sort of uniform under all this camouflage, they are abiding by international law. Another defense is that their camouflage outfit is their uniform.

In many cases, the world's leading nations even copied the guerrilla sniper's methods when it fits their needs. Just think of all the undercover police and military special operations units worldwide who wear civilian clothes, conceal their weapons, but still conduct offensive actions against their enemy. How are the British going to say IRA snipers violated the law of land warfare when the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Special Air Service, and the 14th Military Intelligence Detachment all worked undercover in civilian clothes, concealed their weapons, and shot IRA guerrillas when they saw the opportunity?

British Snipers 1943
Are these legal uniforms?

Ultimately, international law, like morality, is flexible and varies from which perspective you look at it from. During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, Jewish snipers wore both civilian clothes and stolen German uniforms while shooting and killing German soldiers. In the course of the battle, the Jews broke every law under the sun. From the German perspective, the Jewish guerrillas broke the law by simply resisting. This was based on the German racial policy, formalized in 1935 under the Nuremburg Laws, which made persecution of Jews public policy. In early 1942, after the Wannsee

Conference in Berlin, this discrimination against the Jews was transformed from “mere” racial segregation into a process of systematic genocide which became the Holocaust. The mass murder of the Jews was “legal” since the final arbiter of German law, the Fuhrer, ordered such gifted men as Reinhard Heydrich and organizational genius Adolf Eichmann to make it so.

What were the Ghetto Jews supposed to do, walk calmly to the gas chambers, poorly disguised as showers, and deeply inhale the Zyklon B? Should the Jews have worn a common uniform, visible from a distance, and carried their weapons in the open so they could fight the Germans legally and fairly? I say “no.” In this case, one should break the law as early and as often as possible when confronted with a genocidal regime. To date, we can safely say not a single Jewish sniper or guerrilla has been brought to trial for breaking the Geneva Convention while fighting the Nazis. The Holocaust showed that urban guerrilla sniping, as a methodology, is neither illegal nor immoral. How this methodology is employed and to what ends it is used defines the righteousness of the act. Jewish guerrilla snipers, who desperately picked off their Nazi butchers from the sewers, attics, and alleys of the burning Warsaw Ghetto, could not have served a more noble cause.

But where do we draw the line? What about the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, was that a legal military intervention? The Russian government said it was. Then, the Soviet military proceeded to carpet bomb much of the rural Afghan population and dropped untold numbers of mines, some disguised as toys, in order to effect a policy the Afghanistan resistance described as limited genocide. In this situation, what do you think of a Mujahideen sniper in the capital of Kabul putting a single, full metal jacket round into the skull of an off-duty Russian officer? Should this sniper be charged with a war crime because they were dressed like a sheep herder at the time of the shooting? The mujahideen would say this was a legal shooting because the Russians themselves had long ago discarded any pretense of fighting a legal war.

We can also look at the British occupation of Northern Ireland, the Israeli takeover of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. In these situations, the occupiers all claimed to be conducting lawful military operations in support of national security interests. In turn, each resistance movement (all have used guerrilla snipers that broke the laws of land warfare) argued that their oppressors broke international law first by invading and occupying them. On top of it, each resistance movement could point to numerous documented examples of their enemy violating the laws of land warfare by torturing captured guerrillas and repeatedly killing innocent civilians with their clumsy counterinsurgency measures. So, who is right? The reader will have to make their own decision as the best answer I can produce is “it depends.”

Chapter 3

Shoot to Thrill

The best success for snipers did not reside in the number of hits, but in the psychological damage caused to the enemy by shooting commanders or other important men.

- German sniper Matthais Hetzenaur, 345 confirmed kills

The idea of filming the operations is very important, because the scene that shows the falling soldier when hit has more impact on the enemy than any other weapon.

- Commander of Iraqi insurgent sniper brigade

More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media... We are in a media battle, in a race for the hearts and minds of our people.

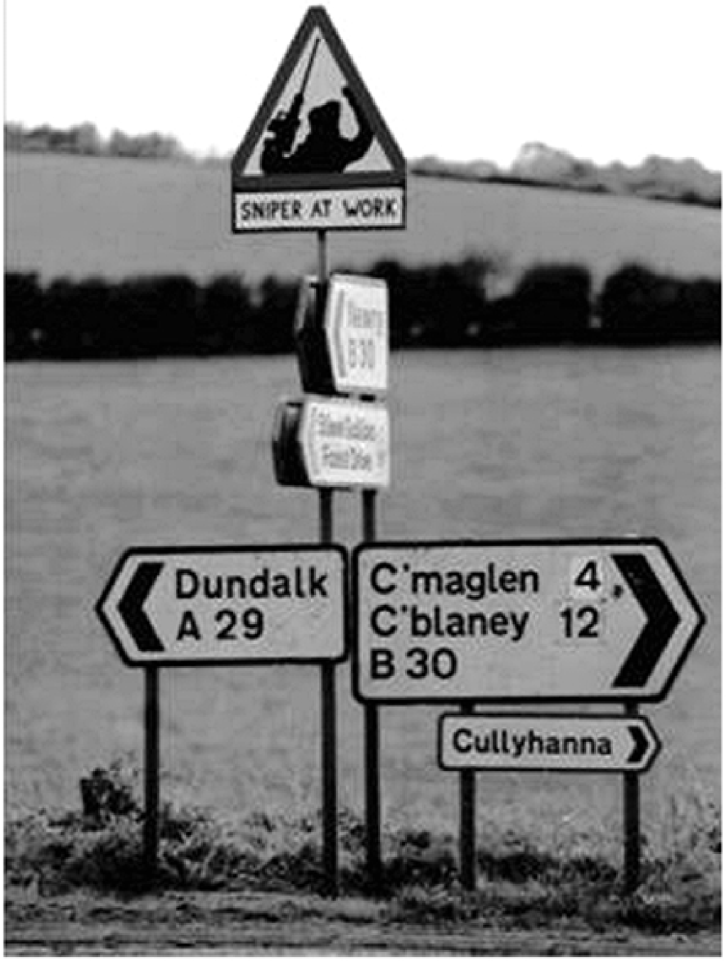
- In a letter from Al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

The Psychology of Sniping

The psychology of sniping is the psychology of fear. John Falk, a journalist who worked in sniper infested Sarajevo, described it best: "Knowing a sniper is loose is like knowing a cobra is at large somewhere in your house. It makes you paranoid. It freezes you. You stop walking by beds, couches: you open drawers. One is left with the eerie sensation that instant death is always just a moment away. People who live under the fear of snipers lose track of everything in the world but their fear; it's a very dark hold that these gunmen have on the regions they terrorize. That's why, if captured, snipers are almost always executed on the spot. It is also the reason most armies disband their sniper units immediately after a war. Snipers are spooky even to the people they serve."[1]

There is something absolutely terrifying about knowing that a lone, skilled gunman is in the area, possibly placing their crosshairs on your head at any moment. This makes people think and when people think, they think about saving themselves. Sniper-conscious people take less risks and play it safe. In a war zone, where soldiers and police officers are paid to do dangerous work, playing it safe means that you no longer do your job. In 1993, British forces working in South Armagh, Northern Ireland were gripped with sniper-fear. During this time, an Irish Republican Army sniper team worked the area and killed seven British soldiers in nine different attacks. Some British units were so afraid of being the next victim they stopped doing their jobs.

The IRA's Sniper At Work Sign



The marketing of modern guerrilla sniping has come a long way from when the IRA first put up their infamous signs during 'The Troubles'.

In fact, one Royal Scots platoon was disciplined because instead of manning a vehicle checkpoint like they were supposed to, they stayed inside the safety of their base and falsified the registrations of the vehicles they were responsible for checking. In this case, the fear of being shot by a sniper overcame military discipline and ceded the surrounding area to the IRA.[2] A subsequent summary of operations in Northern Ireland, written by the British army in 2006, admitted the effects of IRA snipers: “Republican information operations, such as the ‘Sniper at Work’ signs combined with media hype helped build the myth of the sniper. The attacks affected security force operations and had an impact on morale among some troops and police officers serving in South Armagh.”

A guerrilla sniper can also have a significant impact on a larger civilian population. A perfect example of this was the murderous sniping spree committed by the DC Snipers, John Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo. During the fall of 2002, Muhammad and Malvo stalked the greater Washington, DC region, killing people at random over a geographically large area to spread a web of terror. No one was safe. Small children were targeted as were old men and women. Over the course of several weeks, the DC Snipers struck fear in the hearts of tens of thousands of people as entire towns changed their daily habits to avoid the random death lurking the streets. People stocked up on food, children remained at home, and unknown numbers of tourists stayed away. Persistent rumors even spread that Muslim gunmen, loyal to Al-Qaeda, were responsible for the slaughter.

The Sniper’s Second Goal: Overreaction

While one goal of a sniper is to instill fear in the hearts of their enemies in order to paralyze and degrade their every move, a second objective is to manipulate this fear into an overreaction. As John Falk described, snipers are not only feared, but they are also hated. While fighting on the Eastern Front against the Russians in World War II, German sniper Sepp Allerberger was able to elicit a murderous reaction from the opposing Red Army.

On April 2, 1945, the night he won the Knights Cross, Sepp showed the kind of sniping that drove the Russians mad for revenge. On that night, Sepp was on patrol with an infantry squad. The sky was pitch black when a Russian flare suddenly turned the night into day, exposing Sepp and his patrol. Most of the patrol was quickly wiped out by Russian machine-gun fire, leaving Sepp alone to face a Russian infantry company. The Russians then attacked the decimated German patrol in two separate waves. However, the assaulting Russians did not realize Sepp was still alive until he opened fire, at a range of only eighty meters, striking the startled red Army soldiers with explosive bullets. Sepp intentionally aimed at a spot just above the Russian’s hips, so his bullets exploded inside their stomachs and intestines.[3]

After Sepp mowed down the assaulting infantry with well-aimed fire, he turned his attention to the remaining Russians still in their trenches. He targeted the closest machine-gun nest located about one hundred meters away. By now, the Russian machine-gun team knew exactly where he was located, but the two bodies of Sepp’s fallen comrades protected him from the incoming bullets. Despite the enemy fire, Sepp took careful aim and placed an exploding bullet in the machine-gunner’s head and that of his belt feeder. Periodically, a Russian soldier would expose himself and Sepp would put a bullet in his brain. In the course of ten minutes, Sepp killed all eighteen of the Russian soldiers occupying the trench. There were another fifty dead sprawled out across the open field.[4]

German soldiers capture a Russian sniper team during their invasion in the summer of 1941, executing them moments later.

With rifle work like this, it was unsurprising that the Russians, already prone to brutality, were in less than a charitable mood when capturing a German sniper. Sepp described an instance when the Russians captured a young German sniper. This sniper went out to go hunting but never returned. Four days later, a German patrol came across his body. Sepp believes the Russians captured the German sniper with his rifle, which had notches cut in the stock for all the kills he made. The Russians cut the sniper all over his body, cut his balls off and stuffed them in his mouth, and then stuck the barrel of the rifle up his rectum, all the way to the back sight.[5]

After encountering incidents like this, Sepp became a guerrilla sniper hiding among the larger population of “regular” German soldiers. Sepp stopped cutting notches in the stock of his rifle for every Russian he sent to the grave. He refused to wear the issued sniper badge depicting a raven’s head and three oak leaves. And if capture was imminent, Sepp ditched his sniper rifle and carried the more innocuous MP-40 submachine-gun. Sepp strived to avoid any outward appearance of being a sniper to become anonymous. This way, he might actually live if captured by the Russians.

In a guerrilla war, the rage and anger a deadly sniper like Sepp Allerberger causes in the enemy can be used to advance the guerrillas’ cause. This is because the security forces being killed one at a time by an invisible shooter are just as likely to turn their pent up frustrations on the civilian population as they are at the actual shooter. The United States' field manual Combined Arms Operations in Urban Terrain recognizes this problem in their chapter on sniping: "Historically, units that suffered heavy and continual casualties from urban sniper fire and were frustrated by their inability to strike back effectively often have become enraged. Such units may overreact and violate the laws of land warfare concerning the treatment of captured snipers. This tendency is magnified if the unit has been under intense stress of urban combat for an extended time. It is vital that commanders and leaders at all levels understand the laws of land warfare and also understand the psychological pressures of urban warfare. It requires strong leadership and great moral strength to prevent soldiers from releasing their anger and frustration on captured snipers or civilians suspected of sniping at them."

Since a central part of any guerrilla war is winning the support of the population, government forces that indiscriminately kill, injure, or inconvenience the civilian population to get a sniper will only turn the people against them. The same is true for government forces that carelessly destroy the surrounding urban infrastructure and blow up buildings, destroy bridges, and tear up roads. Therefore, a guerrilla sniper that induces fear in their enemy and causes an overreaction that results in the mass detention of innocent people and costly damage to the urban landscape, advances their movement by creating the conditions that turn public opinion against the government.

The Francs-Tireurs and the Franco-German Wars

An example of the power of overreaction took place during the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War when Francs-Tireurs (French partisan forces) fought against the invading Prussian forces. The Francs-Tireurs, which grew from French civilian gun clubs created in the 1860s, were intended to provide the French government with a corps of trained marksmen in case of war. When Prussia invaded France in 1870, the Francs-Tireurs, fighting in civilian garb, fought a guerrilla war against the Prussian troops, relying heavily on guerrilla sniper tactics to pick off unsuspecting Prussian soldiers and to tie down large numbers of the invaders.

In response, the Prussian army considered the Francs-Tireurs dishonorable assassins and executed all captured snipers (and other guerrillas) on the spot. The Prussians argued that the Francs-Tireurs, by fighting in civilian clothes, violated the norms of warfare and could be killed just like one would kill a spy. But the invading Prussians did more than just kill captured Francs-Tireurs, they also employed widespread reprisals against entire villages and towns suspected of harboring the guerrillas. These reprisals, which included mass detentions, pillaging, and the burning of private residences, bred a long-lasting hatred between the French people and the Prussians.

German Hussars capture two Franc-Tireurs in Belgium, 1914.

The Prussian military command, seriously frustrated by the Francs-Tireurs during the war, believed only through even stricter population control measures and mass punishment could the problem be solved. Consequently, when World War I arrived with a terrible thunder in 1914, the invading German army, who found themselves plagued once again with accurately shooting Francs-Tireurs, reverted to harsh pacification measures against the Belgian and French civilian populations. As before, these measures only served to alienate the Belgian and French people, turning them ever more resolutely against the German invader. The by-product of the Germany's escalating pacification war was an increasingly entrenched hatred for the German invaders, who were derisively called the "Boches" or the "Hun" after the barbaric conquerors from the east.

Due in part to this hatred generated from German mistreatment of French civilians during the Great War, France and the other victorious nations enacted their own revenge on the German people with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The German army may have subjected large swaths of Western Europe to their repressive counter-guerrilla measures during the Great War, but a vengeful France imposed an even harsher post-war sentence on the entire German nation which included a humiliating de-militarization of the Fatherland, allied control of Germany's vital industrial Ruhr area, and absolutely crippling war reparation payments. These measures shattered the German state's self-esteem, destroyed the German economy, and created a chaotic environment that led to a low-grade civil war.

Out of this toxic, bubbling cauldron of fear, hate, and loathing came a most unlikely savior: Adolf Hitler. Through the Fuhrer, the resuscitated German people unflinchingly funneled their two decades of humiliation, disgrace, and misery. With a vengeance, the Nazi Phoenix righted past wrongs, steamrolling sacrificial Poland in 1939 and crushing hated France under the steel treads of German panzers in the summer of 1940. And yet again, Western Europe, and particularly France, responded with guerrilla warfare. Just as with the Franco-Prussian War and the Great War, German occupation forces responded with increasingly repressive counter-insurgency tactics.

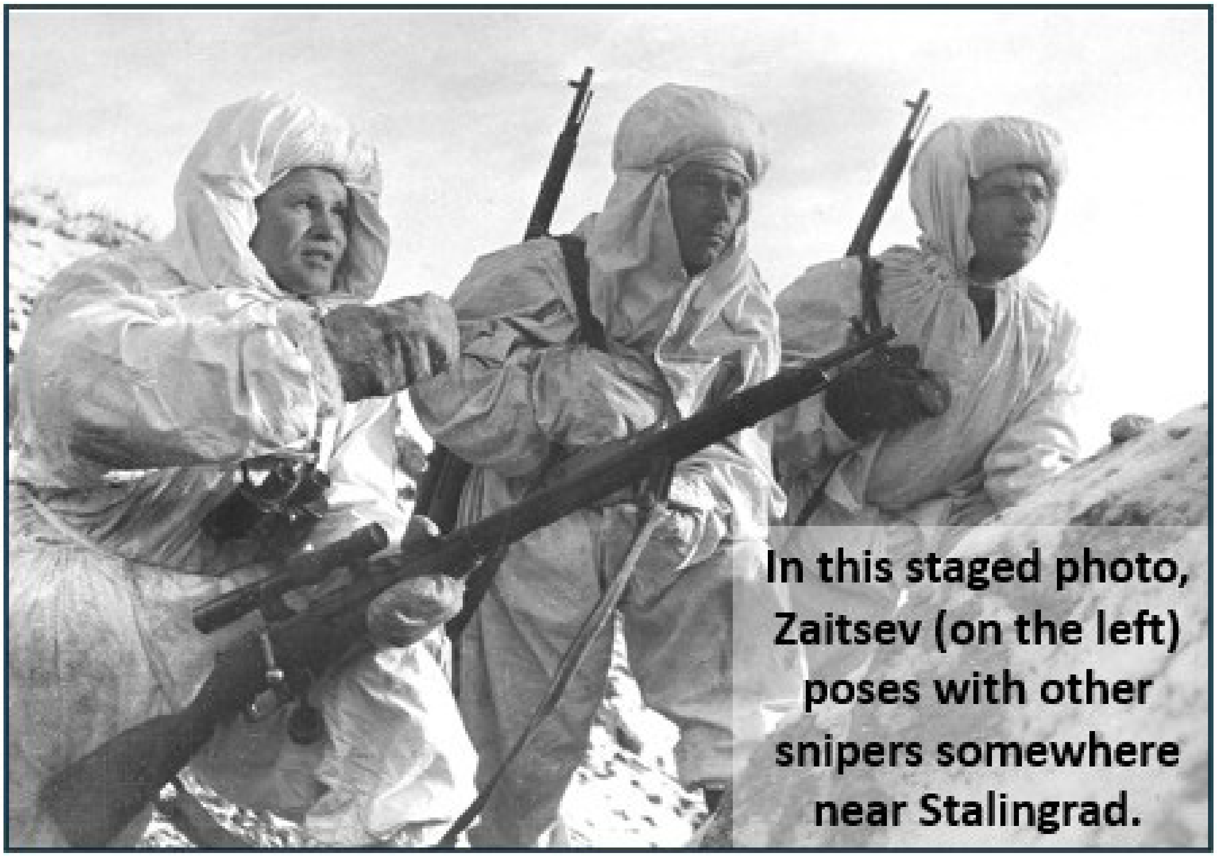
This time the war was different, as Germany now had the Gestapo, which employed such brutal counterinsurgency experts like Klaus Barbie, who tried to beat, execute, and torture the French population into submission. Captured French resistors were also dumped into the German Todt Organization, where they were worked to the bone as forced labor. If digging ditches for the Reich failed to cure the will to resist, more permanent measures might work. This included being thrown into the giant maw of the comprehensive system of concentration camps and slaughterhouses that devoured millions of resistors and enemies of the state, from suspected guerrillas and communists to Jews and the mentally disabled.

After the Third Reich's final defeat in 1945, the allies learned they made a serious mistake after World War I by punishing Germany but leaving her people to their own devices. This time, with the horrors of the Holocaust firmly in mind, the allies decided to occupy and castrate Germany, ensuring a new, militant Germany did not rise from the ashes of the former Nazi state. As of the writing of this book, the allies' post-war strategy worked. In this example, the use of guerrilla snipers, begun in the Franco-Prussian War, contributed to an inseparable chain of events, fueled by spiraling hatreds, which contributed to the greatest bloodbath the world had ever seen.

The Cult of Sniperism: The Myth of Vassili Zaitsev

Like the modern IRA, the Russians of World War II understood the power of promoting their sniping efforts and the single greatest feat of sniper propaganda is without doubt the myth surrounding Russian sniper Vassili Zaitsev and his supposed duel with the Germans' best sniper during the battle of Stalingrad. To understand the power of this myth, one must first understand the circumstances surrounding the battle. Up until the Battle of Stalingrad, which ended in February 1943, the German Wehrmacht (armed forces) mauled the Soviet Union as a vicious wolverine would savage a giant, ponderous bear.

During the course of this mauling, the Red Army and Soviet people suffered losses on a scale never been seen before in the history of warfare. By the time the German Sixth Army could see Stalingrad's skyline in the fall of 1942, millions of Russian soldiers had already been killed and seriously wounded in combat, millions more languished in Spartan POW camps, and millions of Russian civilians were executed, starved to death, or simply obliterated by the German war machine.



In this staged photo, Zaitsev (on the left) poses with other snipers somewhere near Stalingrad.

Considering this grim situation, the Soviet Union needed a psychological victory, they needed a hero. By sheer chance, young Vassili Zaitsev, a Navy payroll clerk who grew up hunting wild game in the Ural mountains to feed his family, became this hero. No one in the Russian army knew that Zaitsev was an excellent shot and or that, one day, he would become an expert urban sniper. The Russian leadership stumbled across Zaitsev when stories about a short, tough, seaman who was picking off Germans finally reached their ears. General Chuikov, commander of the reeling Russian forces in Stalingrad, knew his hard pressed men needed inspiration, so he promoted and publicized Zaitsev's exploits.

Chuikov's decision to exploit Zaitsev's sniper successes led to the creation of what the Russians called "The Cult of Sniperism." Chuikov intentionally encouraged the development of a Russian sniper corps in Stalingrad and he wanted more snipers like Zaitsev fighting in his ranks. As a result of this guidance, Zaitsev started an urban sniper school in the ruins of Stalingrad and eventually trained scores of students that either equaled or surpassed his sniping skills and total enemy body count. By the height of the battle for Stalin's city, the Russians had a large, trained sniper corps inflicting significant, daily losses on the Germans.

While the Cult of Sniperism had real bite to it, Zaitsev and his sniper corps were larger than life in the Russian media. Moscow radio shows trumpeted Zaitsev's success to the Russian people, giving them faith in the fight against the Nazi invaders. Red Army newspapers gloated as Zaitsev's body count grew by leaps and bounds. Soviet propaganda units in Stalingrad cranked out crudely inked flyers glorifying Zaitsev's sniper prowess and distributed them by the arm loads to their front line troops which found their way to the Germans who suffered under his crosshairs.

The Sniper Duel That Never Was

Zaitsev's popularity hit its zenith with the much publicized duel between him and a German sniper, who was supposedly sent to Stalingrad to take him out. According to the Russians, the German Wehrmacht, who were professionally and publicly humiliated by Zaitsev's sniper successes, sent their chief instructor from the sniper school at Zossen, located near Berlin, into the crumbling city of Stalingrad to settle the score. The story of this most famous duel was told by Zaitsev himself in his memoirs Notes of a Sniper.

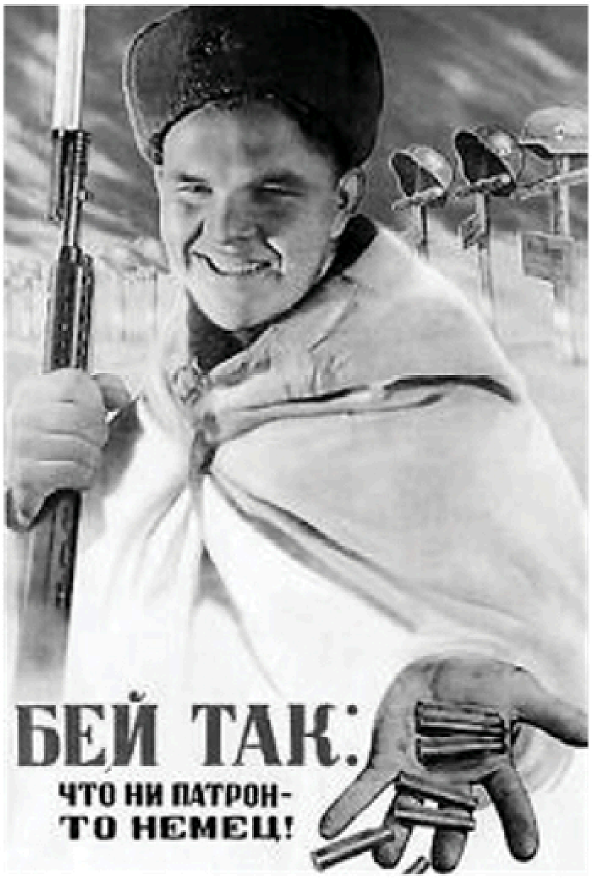
In Vassili's tale, a team of the Russian scouts captured a German soldier for the explicit purpose of interrogating him for battlefield information (the Russians referred to these kind of prisoners as 'tongues' because their sole purpose was to talk). This frightened prisoner indeed talked to save his life and told his captors the German high command had flown in their best sniper, a Major Konings, head of the sniper school near Berlin, with the mission to take out Zaitsev.

Now that Zaitsev knew the German super-sniper was in the city, Zaitsev had to find him just as he assumed the German was looking for him. Zaitsev took his usual thorough approach, trying to detect a pattern from how his own Russian comrades were being shot and wounded in the city. After no luck, he finally had a breakthrough. In one day, two of the Russians' best snipers were targeted by a sniper.

One sniper was shot and wounded and the other had his rifle scope shattered.

The next day, Zaitsev and his partner Kulikov went to the scene of the sniper attack to see if the German shooter was still around. While they surveyed the German lines, they saw a German helmet appear in a trench line and bob along the ditch. However, the movement of the helmet looked unnatural, as if it were placed on top of a stick. Zaitsev knew this was a trap. Konings must have had his assistant present the helmet to get Zaitsev to shoot at it, thus revealing Zaitsev's position and making him vulnerable to Konings' own shot. Instead, Zaitsev and Kulikov snuck off under the protection of darkness in order to craft a plan.

The two went back to the same location the second day, and after hours of careful surveillance, they still saw nothing. They assumed Konings was still lying in wait somewhere, conducting his own surveillance against them, hoping they would make a mistake and expose themselves.



Russian Propaganda

This Russian World War II - era poster says, "Shoot Like This: One Bullet - One German!" The sniper has seven shell casings in the palm of his hand and seven crosses, with a German helmet atop each one, are visible in the background. Posters like these were meant to restore morale on the home front and instill fear in the enemy.

On the third day of their stakeout, the two were accompanied by a political officer named Danilov. As they scanned the rubble, Danilov thought he spotted Konings and rose out of his trench to point him out to Zaitsev. As soon as he did, Konings shot Danilov, but only wounded him. Still, Zaitsev could not figure out where Konings was hiding. Zaitsev continued to study the urban terrain, taking notes as he looked for a clue of where he might be.

Zaitsev finally deduced where the shot came from – directly in front of their position. In front of them were only three possible sniper positions: a burned out tank, a pillbox, and a sheet of iron. Zaitsev guessed Konings was under the sheet of iron, in the shadows underneath it, completely invisible. To test his theory, Zaitsev raised his mitten on a piece of wood. A shot rang out, piercing the mitten and small board. Zaitsev inspected the wood, noticing the bullet entered it from straight on, where the iron sheet was. Zaitsev decided to stay in place for another night. He would try and get Konings the next day.

The next day, Zaitsev and Kulikov scoured the terrain again. Then, as the sun shone brightly above, they saw a glimmer of light reflecting off of something under the sheet of iron. Perhaps a rifle scope? Kulikov tried to lure out Konings by raising his own helmet carefully above his position. Bang! A shot rang out, striking the helmet. Kulikov, the consummate actor, screamed out in agony and collapsed to the ground in imaginary death. Zaitsev in turn fired under the iron sheet, striking Konings, killing him. Later that night, Zaitsev and Kulikov went to Koning's position and recovered his rifle and identification papers, turning them over to their command.[6]

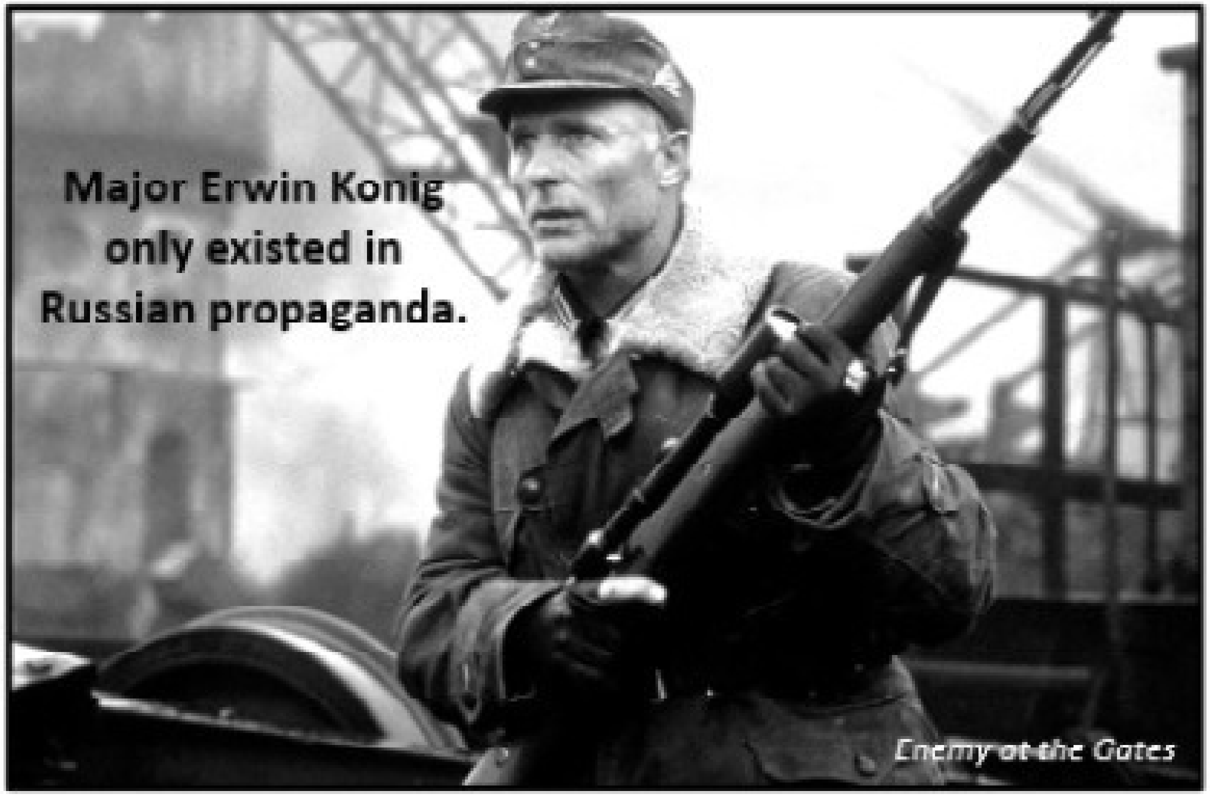
This story has since become the most repeated tale in the history of sniping until it has been accepted as gospel by many historians and sniper enthusiasts. General Chuikov himself repeated this exact story in his 1959 book *The Battle for Stalingrad*. Since Chuikov's book is critical of the Russians' own failures and gives due credit to the German war machine, his citing of the Zaitsev story gave it considerable credence. William Craig's 1973 work *Enemy At The Gates* repeats this same story as if repeating some sort of religious doctrine. In 1999, David L. Robbins published his novel *War of the Rats*, a fictional account of the events leading up to the duel between

Zaitsev and Konings. Only two years later, in 2001, the movie *Enemy at the Gates* hit the theaters, billed as the “true story” of the now famous sniper duel between Zaitsev and his German nemesis. To top it off, John Plaster repeats a shortened version of the same story in his 2006 book *The Ultimate Sniper*.

I have no doubt many people who read these books or saw the movie also believe the story Zaitsev himself printed in his book *Notes of a Sniper*. The only problem with this story is it never happened. Yes, Zaitsev did shoot it out with a German sniper – he shot it out with many German snipers. However, the supposed duel between Zaitsev and a German super-sniper is pure propaganda. There are many reasons why an investigator, looking at the tale with a critical eye, would find the story less than convincing. While we could write an entire chapter as to why this yarn does not hold any water, here are some of the most salient reasons:

- It is unlikely the German high command, fighting a costly war in North Africa, worried about an invasion of France, and taking astronomical losses all along the Eastern Front, would get so involved as to make the decision to send one man, their best sniper-instructor, to Stalingrad. And there is absolutely no official or personal documentation anywhere supporting that this happened.
- No one, either Russian or German, has proven a “Major Konings” ever existed. If he did die in combat, the German army would have issued a death notice and sent official documents to his family. This never happened.
- German officers were not snipers, enlisted men were.
- It is statistically improbable two individual snipers, fighting in a twenty-mile long city, caught in between two armies equaling more than 100,000 men, could find each other to duel.
- The German that Zaitsev supposedly shot was not a skilled sniper. He stayed in an isolated position for too long, he fell for Zaitsev’s obvious ruses and failed to detect Zaitsev’s own predictable trap. In short, he did everything that Zaitsev said a good sniper would never do.

- Some researchers claim the Germans really sent SS Standartenfuehrer Heinz Thorwald to kill Zaitsev. Again, there is no proof of this anywhere, SS colonels were not snipers, and this additional name reveals yet another inconsistency in the story.
- The Russians say a German prisoner told them the Germans were sending a sniper to get Zaitsev. How did this soldier know? Did someone tell him personally? Was it common knowledge in the German ranks? There is no evidence of this ever happening except word of mouth…from the Russians.
- Zaitsev said he took the personal documents from the German sniper's body and gave them to his superiors. The Russians also say they have the scope from the German sniper in a museum, but where are these supposed documents?



The Russians' propaganda machine spun this story so aggressively and consistently that even today many people accept this account as fact. This is exactly what the Russians wanted. They wanted to create the image of a perfect sniper who was always victorious and triumphed over evil, no matter what the odds. In this sense, the story of the famous duel was an analogy for the larger battle of Stalingrad. Just as Zaitsev, the humble Siberian shepherd, was able to beat the best the Aryan race had to offer, the Russians' rag-tag army in Stalingrad soundly beat the mighty German Sixth Army. The story of Zaitsev's duel was really a story of the whole Russian Army, the entire Russian people. Zaitsev was Russia.

One must appreciate what the Russian propaganda machine accomplished. They made it seem, to both Russian and German troops alike, there was a Russian sniper under every roof, in every trench, behind every bush, patiently watching and waiting for each and every German soldier in the entire Wehrmacht. As a result, the Russians instilled fear in the average German soldier, making the German soldier sniper conscious throughout the rest of the war. While we can admire the Russian success in the field of sniper psychology, one has to wonder at the German failure. Why did the Germans fail to promote their own sniper movement in order to instill fear in their enemies?

Germany and Sniping

There were many reasons why the Germans did not embrace "The Cult of Sniperism" like the Red Army did. The primary reasons were institutional. The German Wehrmacht was a combined arms war machine and the lone sniper did not figure in their larger calculations. The panzer divisions and the Luftwaffe were the champions of the Wehrmacht, not the lowly scharfschutze. While the rifleman was given due respect, most were not national heroes. Many wartime Germans knew who Michael Wittmann was, the blond handsome panzer commander credited with being the most successful tank commander in the history of warfare, destroying hundreds of enemy tanks, artillery pieces, and armored vehicles. Equally famous was unrepentant Nazi Hans Ulrich Rudel, a Stuka dive bomber pilot who destroyed over 2,000 ground targets and won the diamonds to the Knights Cross. And the German people knew very well the name of Erich Hartmann, called the Black Devil of the Ukraine by his enemies, a dashing fighter pilot with 352 confirmed kills.

But who ever heard of Matthais Hetzenaur, a German sniper with the 3rd Gebirgsjaeger Division? Hetzenaur had at least 345 confirmed kills during the war and probably several hundred unconfirmed kills. Sepp Allerberger had 257 confirmed kills and most likely a total body count of 500. These men got a pat on the back from their fellow soldiers who appreciated their dirty work, and were eventually awarded a cheap, cloth sniper badge for their efforts in 1944. Some were recommended for a higher award if they pulled off a particularly spectacular feat like the night Allerberger wiped out an entire Russian infantry company to the last man. There were no front page headlines for these men who did the most dangerous of jobs. As a result, the German people were not inspired by the actions of these men and the Russians did not live in fear of them. German snipers were like a tree falling in the forest with no one to hear them.

An unlikely supporter for a more robust German sniper program was the Reichsfuhrer of the SS, Heinrich Himmler. Although the bookish Himmler had no experience in sniping himself, he saw its value. In a letter Himmler sent to Albert Speer, dated December 18, 1944, Himmler expressed some of his views about the overall German sniping effort: “Dear Party Member Speer: Perhaps you have already heard that I’m encouraging and accelerating sharpshooting training in the Grenadier Divisions. We have already attained outstanding results. I have initiated a contest between all divisions of the army and the SS that are under my command. With the 50th confirmed sharpshooter hit – that is, when he has virtually eliminated a Soviet Infantry Company – each man receives a wristwatch from me and reports to my Field Headquarters. With the 100th hit, he receives a hunting rifle and with the 150th he is invited by me to go hunting to shoot a stag or chamois buck.

Young Austrian sniper Matthaus Hetzenauer was Germany's top sniper during WWII. He received the Knights Cross in 1945 and later survived five years as a Russian prisoner of war. He also served several tours in the same unit with fellow sniper Sepp Allerberger. Combined, they had over 600 confirmed sniper kills and possibly close to 1,000 unconfirmed. While recognized for their success, they were just a small part of the German war machine.

The heavy requirement of sharpshooting underlies my following representation: Per experience, it is entirely possible that a division can effect at least 200 hits a month. I have several divisions which have attained 300 and 400 hits.

Suppose there were only one hundred divisions on the entire Eastern Front – there are significantly more – that would mean 20,000 dead foes in one month. It should be taken into consideration that these fallen foes belong to fighting infantry, not to the supply lines, the artillery or the rear support services. The Soviet rifle division today has 2 Infantry regiments of 12 Companies with 50 men each; in all about 1200 men.

20,000 dead foes per month by means of sharpshooter hits means the elimination of the infantry of almost 17 rifle divisions, a result we cannot obtain more effectively, and – if you prefer, more expensively – with the employment of the least amount of armament. For this, however, it is necessary that we obtain more sharpshooter rifles. I would be very grateful if you could step up the production of telescopic sights, rifles with telescopic sights and perhaps also machine carbines with telescopic sights as soon as possible. Signed Himmler."[7]

Any support for a more aggressive sniper program was a good thing for the Wehrmacht, but Himmler appreciated the sniper corps for statistical – not psychological – reasons. As 1945 approached the dying Reich, Himmler thought that killing 240,000 Russians in the final year would make a dent in the Red Army. He could not have been more wrong. The Russians buried 240,000 dead a month, for four months, in the murderous slag heap called Stalingrad and they still kept coming. The Russian nation as a whole, since the first horrible summer of 1941, lost five million dead a year for four years and still endured. A statistical perspective on sniping, when facing the Red Army, was doomed to failure. The Red Army, as an institution, was designed to take gigantic, near-fatal losses but survive, like some teetering, grotesque Frankenstein, with its limbs hacked off and then crudely reattached.

Instead, Himmler should have written a letter – not to Albert Speer – but to Joseph Goebbels, Germany's Minister for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda who had a white-knuckled stranglehold on the German media outlets. The German sniper movement would have been better served if Goebbels' propaganda machine ran regular radio broadcasts about its eagle-eyed Aryan sharpshooters and plastered running tallies of their kills on the front pages of the Reich's newspapers. Goebbels and the Wehrmacht should have copied the Soviet approach, since the spreading of fear was a more powerful tool for the severely outnumbered Reich. Ultimately, the Red Army understood the psychology of sniping far better than their German foes.

Marketing the Urban Guerrilla Sniper

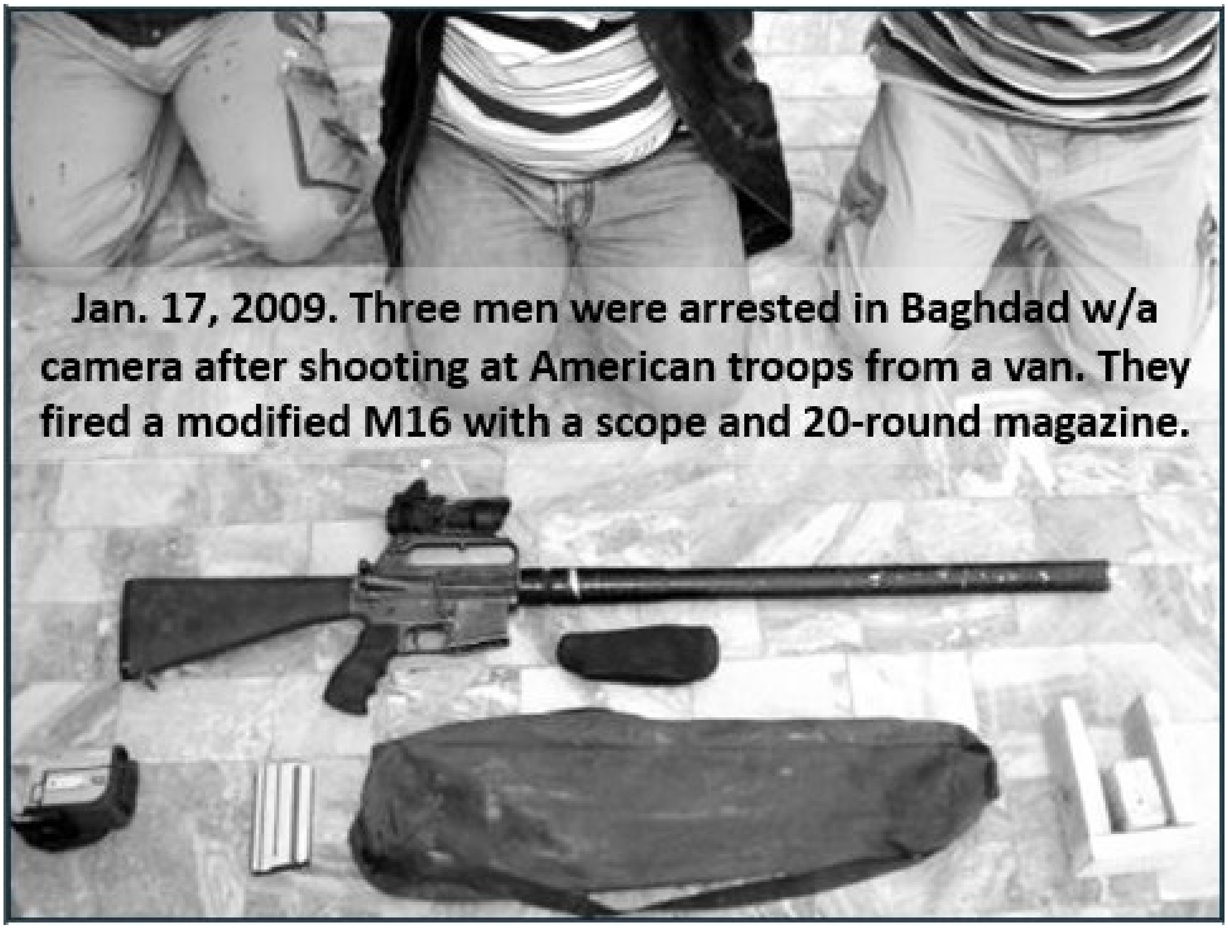
Over the course of many decades and wars, no military – and certainly no guerrilla movement – equaled the Russian exploitation of sniping until the 2003 war in Iraq. While most Iraqi insurgent snipers were not exceptionally talented shooters, (not one displayed the prowess of a Vassili Zaitsev or a Sepp Allerberger) the Iraqi resistance did understand the psychology of sniping. In Iraq, the insurgents gave a name and an identity to their guerrilla sniper campaign, creating a single super-sniper they called “Juba.” The insurgents cleverly attributed a variety of skillful sniper attacks to this single sniper entity who seemed to be everywhere. Importantly, the key to the insurgents’ marketing success were their procedures for filming and then distributing their sniper attacks to an international audience.

The Iraqi insurgent snipers got their film coverage by assigning a cameraman to record the sniper’s attack. Most often, the shooter and the cameraman were collocated side by side. When the sniper made their shot from their concealed position, the cameraman filmed from an angle almost in line with the shooter. The cameraman was so close to the shooter that, at times, it looked like the camera was attached to the rifle. On occasion, the snipers even filmed the shootings through the scope of their rifle. The end result was a first-person perspective of the shooting.

Getting good sniper footage was just one step in the insurgents’ marketing process. The next step was getting this film into a format the hungry consumer could devour. This was easy since the sniper attacks were filmed on digital cameras. After the cameraman filmed the attack and made their getaway, they went to a secure location, like a safehouse, and hooked their camera up to a computer. Using basic, commercially available software, they downloaded, edited, and burned their footage onto compact discs (CDs). They distributed the CDs through a thriving underground network that sold CDs to the discriminating customer on anything from fiery IED attacks to gruesome beheadings.

The most important venue for insurgent sniper videos was the internet. The Iraqi insurgency was media-savvy enough to develop its own websites that promoted the insurgency and glorified their attacks on the government and American occupation forces. If the average Iraqi citizen was unwilling to risk being caught in possession of insurgent propaganda – which may get them a painful beating by the police or even jail time – it was safer just to log onto a guerrilla website and see the video online. If the consumer watched the video in the comfort of their own home, they could always delete the web history and the internet cookies after getting their insurgency fix. If they did not want to risk having incriminating electrons hidden away somewhere in the electronic guts of their computers, they could go to an internet cafe and log on there. In Iraq, watching insurgent propaganda was like watching porn. No one would publicly condone it, it was officially outlawed by the government, but everyone did it and the government could not stop it.

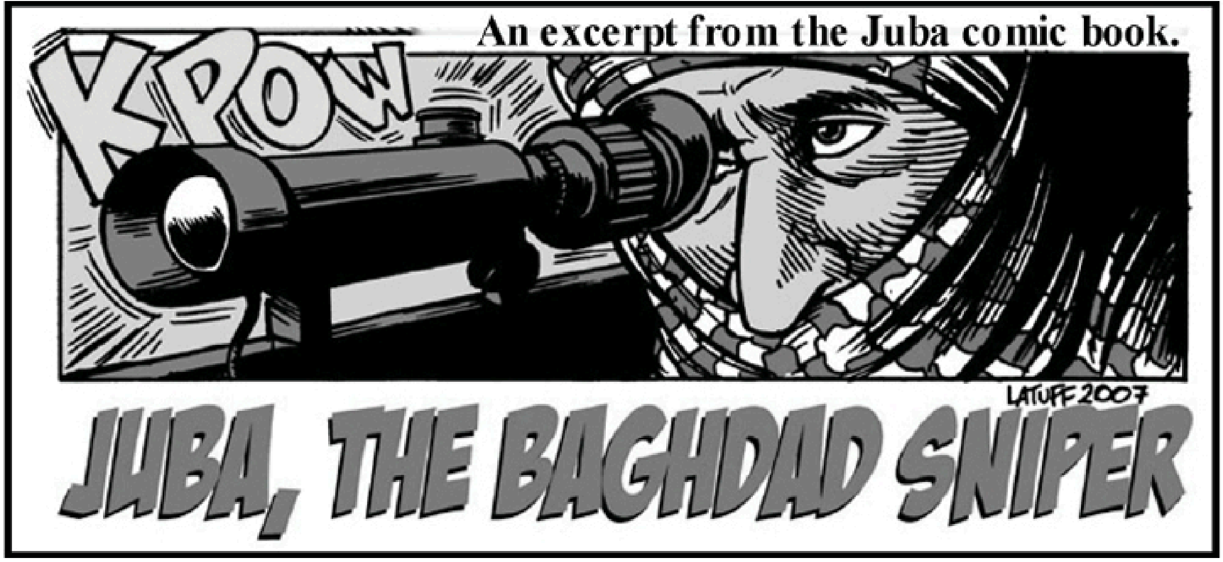
Because the insurgents placed their sniper footage on internet service providers (ISPs) in neutral countries like Syria and Jordan, the Iraqi and U.S. governments were unable to control it or shut it down. Even if an ISP was shut down, it was a temporary annoyance at best, as another ISP was just a few clicks and an anonymous credit card away from being up and running. With the internet's global reach, insurgent sniper propaganda found itself readily available across the world and in America's own living rooms. One just had to log onto www.YouTube.com or www.ogreish.com to see this footage. YouTube is a particularly potent media tool because 100 million people a day log onto the site and one Iraqi insurgent sniper video, which offered the interested viewer tips on how to shoot American soldiers, received 30,000 hits before it was taken down. Today, anyone in the world can do a Google or Dogpile search for "propaganda + sniper" and find what they are looking for.



Jan. 17, 2009. Three men were arrested in Baghdad w/a camera after shooting at American troops from a van. They fired a modified M16 with a scope and 20-round magazine.

Another arrow in the Iraqi insurgents' media quiver was international television. Just think of the hundreds of millions of people a day who watch the world's major news channels like America's Cable News Network (CNN), the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), Germany's Der Spiegel news network, and Qatar's Al-Jazeera. CNN has a true global reach, and as of 2007, its news services were available to more than 1.5 billion people. If CNN was a giant in its field, then BBC would be a colossus, bringing in even larger audiences through its radio shows, TV news, and internet sites. In 2007, the BBC was rated as single, largest media organization on the planet. Germany's Der Spiegel operated in the shadows of media giants like CNN and the BBC, but it was Germany's number one magazine with millions of readers and had its own internet site. And then there was Al-Jazeera, the most influential Arab media network in the Middle East. Although it was only created in 1996, Al-Jazeera already reached an estimated 50 million Arab homes and 80 million English speaking homes by 2007.

It is important to understand the reach and influence of these media giants because each one of them aired stories and/or videos of the Iraqi insurgents' sniper attacks against Iraqi government and American forces. On October 18, 2006, CNN's show Anderson Cooper 360 aired a five minute piece about Iraqi insurgent sniping, including a sniper video produced by the Islamic Army in Iraq. While the show had a huge audience, even more attention was brought to the sniper piece when the American public debated if CNN should have showed the insurgents' sniper video or not. In fact, the controversy brought more coverage to the insurgents' sniper operations than if there was no controversy at all.



On their website, CNN explained why they showed the sniper footage. They admitted that there could be some benefit to the insurgents by airing the sniper piece and that some viewers would be upset by the graphic footage. However, CNN argued that the piece was newsworthy and important to show because of the rising casualties in Iraq, many of which were caused by snipers. Out of respect to the soldiers actually targeted in the film, CNN explained they faded the screen to black before actually showing the impact of the sniper's round. Some readers expressed outrage at CNN airing the sniper video while others praised CNN for showing the American people the "unvarnished truth."[8]

During the same period as the CNN piece, Der Spiegel's TV network aired a special on the Iraqi insurgent snipers that included

Juba sniper footage, an interview with an American soldier wounded in that sniper attack, and then an insurgent sniper showing off his sniper equipment and explaining some of their new methods. For the German media giant, this was just another informational piece on the guerrilla war in Iraq that revealed some of the insurgents' latest tactics. Because Germany did not have any soldiers in Iraq getting shot by urban guerrilla snipers, there was no outcry from the German public and no resulting swirl of controversy.

In October 2006, Al-Jazeera ran a similar video showing insurgent snipers shooting U.S. soldiers. This piece included an interview with the commander of an insurgent sniper brigade who explained the impact of their sniping on the enemy. From the insurgents' perspective, it was important to get their sniper footage on a mainstream Arab news network in order to reach out to the millions of Arabs living adjacent to Iraq in Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia (and the rest of the Middle East for that matter). Videos like this showed the insurgents' success against the occupiers, inspired new volunteers to come and fight in Iraq, and reassured existing supporters around the world that their moral and monetary backing was a worthwhile investment.

It is significant to note that the insurgent film airing on the October 2006 Al-Jazeera piece was an example of high quality media work. In the beginning of the guerrilla war in 2003-2004, the Iraqi insurgents' media efforts were often of inferior quality, with grainy videos and pictures pasted together haphazardly, obviously made by amateurs. By the time of the sniper video in 2006, the insurgents' media process had improved drastically as they now employed professional media experts to create, edit, exploit, and distribute slick, well-packaged sniper propaganda worldwide. The Iraqi insurgents showed themselves to be a learning, adaptive organization that valued the art of sniping. They also understood that the impact of their attacks would be amplified exponentially if they put them in the hands of the world's media giants.

Once Juba became a hero to the insurgency, other independent supporters of the resistance capitalized on his popularity to spread the myth of Juba even further. The Brazilian political cartoonist Carlos Latuff made a comic book about Juba, where the main character does battle with arrogant American forces and guns them down with his sniper rifle. While most writers try to protect their works, Latuff, who posts his Juba comic book on various websites, encourages his readers to copy, download, and distribute his Juba comic book as widely as possible.

Sniper Media Technology

Ever since the creation of compact, portable still and motion picture cameras in the mid-1800s, man had the ability to photograph and film their sniper attacks. However, it was not until World War II and the battle for Stalingrad that snipers actually began employing cameras in combination with their sniping. The Red Army, for example, took staged photos of their much vaunted snipers gunning down supposed German soldiers in the streets of Stalingrad. With these, the Russian photographer stood right over the sniper’s shoulder, getting pictures of not only their falling victim, but also the shooter’s rifle. From this perspective, the reader could almost believe they were holding the rifle themselves, staring down the cold barrel at a Nazi invader.

While in Stalingrad, Vassili Zaitsev noticed some German snipers were actually doing one better, they photographed their targets through the scopes on their rifles. Zaitsev mentioned this in his book, that a German sniper (who Zaitsev eventually shot) used some sort of photographic device to take pictures through his scope. One can assume the German sniper was using a personal camera, attached to his rifle scope, to take pictures of his targets, perhaps before and after he shot them. While any sniper anywhere in the world with a camera could do the same from World War II and on, the practice never caught on. Even Zaitsev and the Russians, who took sniper media exploitation to new levels, failed to recognize the potential for capturing their actual sniper attacks on film.

RIX Storm S2

- 3.5x magnification
- 1,400-yard range
- Weighs 0.97 lbs.

- $799.00
- Picatinny mount
- 32GB memory
- Wi-fi & cellphone app compatible

RIX
STORM S2

Some guerrilla organizations have embraced the use of modern media technology like the Chechen, Palestinian and ISIS movements but they too failed to exploit their sniper operations to the fullest. Only with the guerrilla war in Iraq did one see an organization using first-person video footage of their sniper operations. It was the Iraqi insurgent sniper teams who first filmed their sniper attacks in an effort to distribute them worldwide. And it was easy. All they did was have a cameraman stand shoulder to shoulder with the shooter and film the entire attack from the sniper’s perspective.

Why it took 150 years for an organization to figure out how to exploit existing media technology and sniper operations is anyone’s guess. It took an appreciation of the media, modern technology, sniper operations, and guerrilla warfare to produce the latest methodology of actually filming sniper operations from the shooter’s perspective. It just happened to be the Iraqi insurgents who finally figured it out.

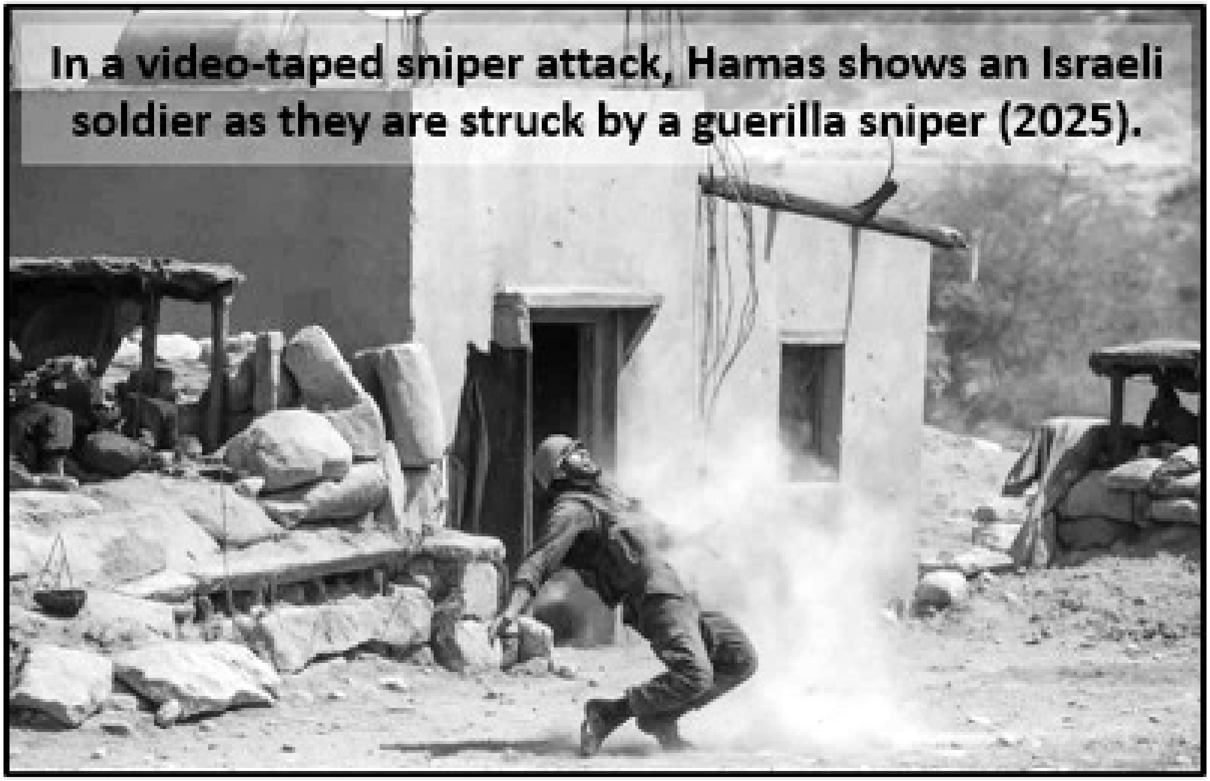
Today, there are much better options than handheld camcorders for filming sniper attacks like helmet mounted cameras that have been used for years by law enforcement, skydivers, race car drivers, and other outdoor sport enthusiasts. The cameras are small and the recording devices lightweight and concealable. This way, as the shooter looks down the sights of their weapon, the camera is recording almost exactly what the shooter sees. And it's easy with the GoPro Hero selling for just $199.99 which has great video quality and is smart-phone compatible.

While there are commercially available binoculars, monoculars and NVGs (Night Vision Goggles) with integral video capability that record video via wi-fi directly to your smartphone, why bother when there are sniper scopes that do the same? For instance, American company RIX makes a host of hunting and tactical night-vision products like their Storm series of thermal imaging scopes. The Storm scopes have an integral video and picture capability as well as live wi-fi video streaming to your smartphone (Android and iOS). Other scope manufacturers even have recoil triggered cameras so that the shooter doesn't have to do anything other than pull the trigger.

From a security perspective let's consider the implications of a sniper scope with integral video using wi-fi to record the shot on a cellphone. First, the sniper takes the shot and records it on their cellphone. Then, they immediately forward the video through Telegram to a support cell 100 miles away for uploading onto social media. The sniper then deletes the video, deletes Telegram, and deletes the scope app from their phone. Unless their phone is forensically exploited, there is nothing incriminating to get from the phone.

In 2013, the U.S. company Tracking Point developed an advanced rifle scope with an integral computer that made a host of automatic corrections for the shooter with onboard wi-fi video streaming to a smartphone. A year later, the U.S. Army purchased a handful of these systems for testing with their XM2010 Enhanced Sniper Rifle program. However, in 2015, two Black Hat hackers discovered that if they were within wi-fi range of the system, they could hack the scope and feed it false information so the shooter would never hit a target.[9]

The company didn’t respond to the problem until 2017 when Wired magazine ran an article about it. In 2018, Talon Precision optics bought out Tracking Point and then apparently stopped working on a commercial product. This shows the challenges of rifle and scope manufacturers entering the software tech space without having the requisite deep know-ledge to do so.[10]



In a video-taped sniper attack, Hamas shows an Israeli soldier as they are struck by a guerilla sniper (2025).

Looking Ahead

If we look at the ongoing Ukraine War (2022-2025), we see the evolution of sniper media where the videos of shooters from both sides are widely available on places like YouTube, Telegram, and X. It is no longer unusual to see sniper videos shot from their scopes, it is expected. In just one example, the video “Ukrainian Snipers with Thermal Scope Take Down Russian Troops” on YouTube by STATE24 has 1.4 million views. There are three reasons for this proliferation of sniper videos: an integrated sniper scope video capability, purposeful cellphone compatibility, and the widespread use of social media accounts.

Any sniper team with the desire to advertise their attacks to a worldwide audience can easily do so no matter where they are. On my last tour in Afghanistan in 2019, local cellphone companies already offered countrywide connectivity through small portable satellite-enabled pucks. The Taliban and ISIS used these for cellphone communications even in the most remote and inhospitable areas from the FATA to Helmand Province. They also smuggled the pucks into maximum security prisons where they used them for wi-fi hotspots. Today, the real limiting factor of marketing sniper propaganda is the organization itself and their own understanding of the available technology and the importance of social media distribution.

Chapter 4
Tools of the Trade

When the Provisional Army Council came into being, the arms situation was chaotic. Before the reorganization, representatives of the local defense committees had been forced to seek equipment and supplies on their own from any sources willing to provide (or promise) them.

- IRA leader Sean MacStiofain commenting on the poor state of the IRA's arms supply network in 1969

Long Guns as Sniper Weapons

While psychology is the most important aspect of sniping, the shooter's weapon is a close second. However, the urban guerrilla sniper chooses their weapon based on different considerations than conventional snipers. For example, an IRA sniper in Northern Ireland cannot go to their local gun shop in Belfast and ask the dealer for their best urban sniping rifle. Instead, the sniper may have to use an existing weapon system designed for something else and then use this dual-purpose weapon for their own requirements.

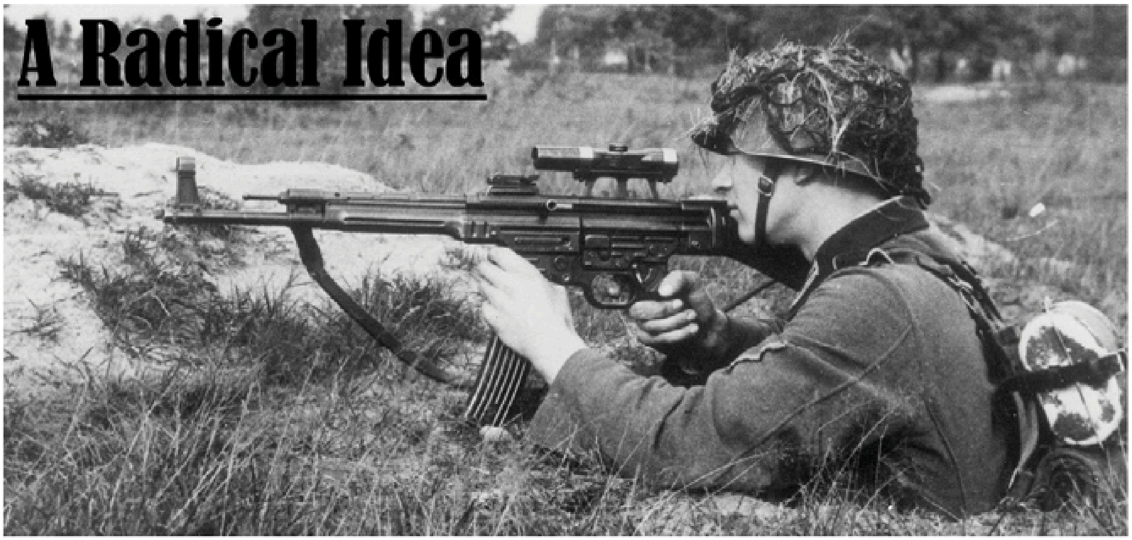
I heard the saying once, "Your mind is like a parachute…it only works when it's open." This is true when talking about the kind of weapons suitable for urban sniping. With that saying in mind, I was eager to bounce some ideas off a few friends to see if their minds were open like a parachute. I started on friend #1, Tom, who is an avid shooter and hunter. I asked him what he thought about using a shotgun for sniping. He looked at me like I had been drinking too much and simply shook his head. I then explained to him exactly how a shotgun could be used as a sniper weapon and he had to concede, after I presented a solid argument, that it was possible. He conceded to my superior logic by saying, "I guess. Whatever." Even though a shotgun with a slug barrel and a scope is designed for killing deer at hundreds of yards, Tom did not want to shatter his preconceived notions.

Then, I decided to talk these ideas over with another friend, Jack, who is a school trained Army sniper. Jack fought in many recent conflicts, to include Afghanistan and Iraq, and had a score of enemy kills to his credit as a sniper. I knew Jack, as an experienced sniper, would be open to new ideas. So, I tested the waters with a few questions about what he thought about using an AK-47 assault rifle as a sniper rifle. I described how I would accurize it with a scope and a bipod. This time, unlike Tom, Jack did not look at me like I was inebriated. Instead, he looked at me like I was an idiot: “Why would you ever want to use an AK-47 for a sniper rifle? It’s a piece of junk.”

I reasoned that in an urban environment, at close range, it is good enough. But he insisted, “Why? There are so many better, accurate weapons out there.” Yes, I knew that. But what if you had to? What if you had to make due to with a second-rate piece of equipment because you had no money, the government controlled all the guns, and you were in this less than perfect situation? So what if you didn’t have a beautiful, gleaming sniper rifle to fight with? Would you give up? Or would you make do with what you had? I would make do with what I had.

The first thing one must understand is the urban sniper does not necessarily need a far-reaching gun. Something accurate to 300 meters will do. Many guns the average shooter classifies as a piece of junk will probably work. This includes semi-automatic weapons, short-barreled surplus carbines, submachine guns, and weapons firing underpowered cartridges like a .22 caliber LR or even a 9 mm round. When the reader surveys the following weapon systems presented as potential sniper weapons, they should look at these systems with the critical eye of an urban guerrilla sniper. They should try and understand what the guerrilla needs to be effective and what is good enough for the job. Also, the reader should consider how expensive the weapon is in question, how hard is it to get ammunition, are replacement parts readily available, and are there suppressors for the weapon?

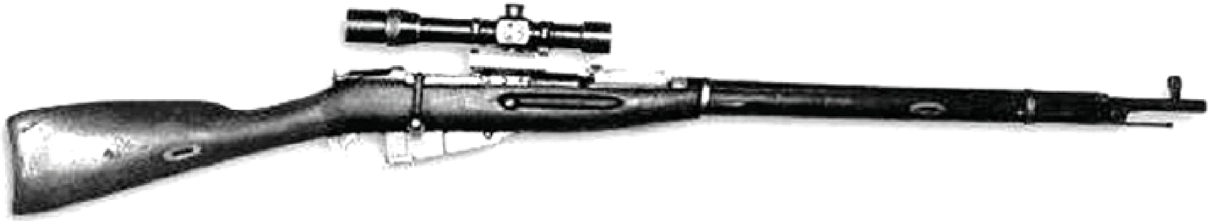
A Radical Idea



Bundes Archives Bild 146-1979-118-55

A German soldier aims down range with a Stg 44, the first assault rifle to ever be used for sniping.

Mosin-Nagant 91/30



Production History: The original Mosin-Nagant 1891 replaced the Russian Empire's obsolete single-shot rifles and was modified in 1930 (it was shortened and gained a modern receiver). It became the standard-issue infantry rifle for the Soviet Union from 1930-1945, was produced in the millions, and saw action in every theater of the Russians' war.

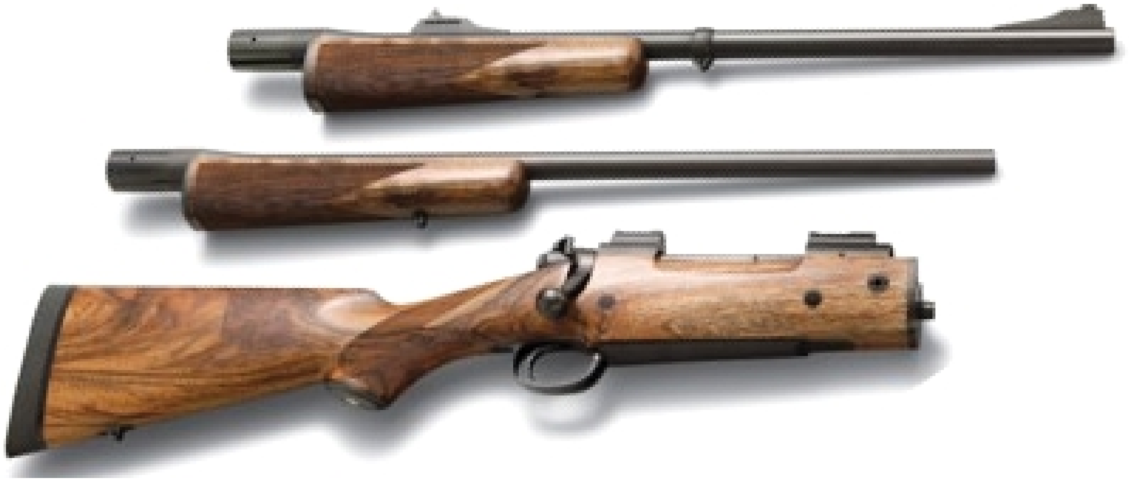
Description: A bolt-action rifle, fires a 7.62 mm x 54 mm round, fed by a 5-round internal charger clip, is 52-inches long, with a 29-inch barrel, and weighs approximately nine and a half pounds. The 91/30 was most often used in conjunction with a 4 x power PE or 3.5 x power PU scope.

Range/Accuracy: During production testing, exceptionally accurate 91/30's were hand selected as sniper rifles. A trained Russian sniper was expected to place ten rounds into a one and a half inch circle at 100 meters, into a three-inch circle at 200 meters, into a seven-inch circle at 400 meters, and into a fourteen-inch circle at 600m.

Pros & Cons: This is an inexpensive rifle and surplus models can be bought for $49.99. Ammo is plentiful and is also relatively cheap. The 91/30 is not a purpose-built sniper rifle, it is an infantry rifle pressed into use as a sniper weapon. At 52 inches long, it is not a concealable by any means. The 91/30 is a loud weapon with a large muzzle flash.

Sniper Use: Russian and German snipers used the 91/30 extensively in World War II, such as Vassili Zaitsev, who became famous during the Battle of Stalingrad. Many other Russian snipers scored hundreds of kills against the Germans using the 91/30. North Korean and Chinese snipers used the 91/30s during the Korean War. NVA/VC snipers used surplus 91/30s in Indochina against the French and Americans. The PLO used the venerable rifle in their sniper war against Israel. Russian designated marksmen in Ukraine (2022-2025) still use the 91/30, reflecting their antiquated supply chains and lack of purpose-built sniper systems.

Dakota 76 Takedown Traveler



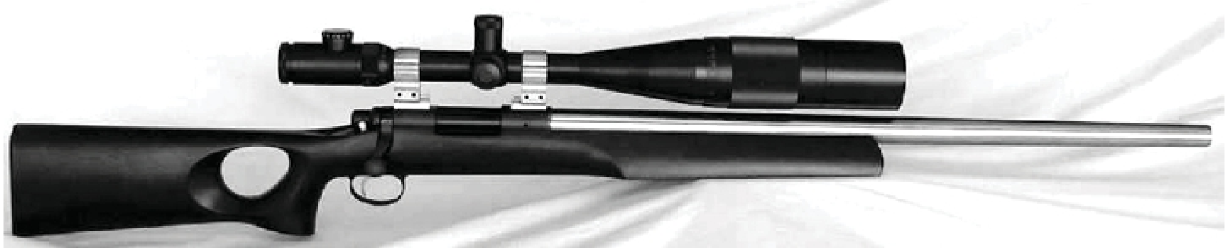
Production History: Dakota Arms was founded in 1986 in Sturgis, South Dakota. The company was later purchased by Remington Arms Company in 2009, which subsequently went bankrupt in 2018 and 2020. The company reemerged as Parkway Arms with many of the same employees at the same location. Parkway continues its previous focus on custom-built, large caliber, big-game rifles for safari hunting in Africa although they no longer build take-down rifles.

Description: A bolt-action rifle with a 24-inch barrel, weighing 9.5 pounds that is chambered for a variety of game rounds like the .300WM, .375 HHM, .416, and .450 Dakota. The rifle is fed from a 3+1 internal box magazine with a hinged-floorplate. The barrel and fore-end are removed at the receiver using an Allen-head screw allowing the two separate components to slide apart.

Range/Accuracy: Models chambered for the .300WM shoot sub MOA groups at 100 yards. Dakota guarantees that point of impact will remain consistent after disassembly and reassembly.

Pros & Cons: This rifle, like all takedown rifles, is designed to be concealed and it is quickly assembled and disassembled. When in takedown mode, it is only 25 inches long. This is not a mass-produced weapon and is therefore easier to trace. Unique rifles like this means there are fewer aftermarket products available for them. Less common ammunition can be harder to get under battlefield conditions. Aftermarket suppressors are not readily available and must be custom-made. The Dakata is expensive, selling anywhere from $8,000.00-$10,000.00.

Benchrest Target Rifles



Production History: Benchrest weapons evolved from benchrest competitions that grew in popularity in the 1940s. Benchrest is a type of shooting where the shooter sits at a bench and uses mechanical means (like specialized tripods) to stabilize their weapon; the shooter intentionally minimizes interaction with the rifle since more human contact equals reduced accuracy.

Description: Dimensions vary depending on the model. Most benchrest guns are custom-made where a shooter selects a specific action, chooses a barrel, and then selects a stock and combines them. Benchrest guns are bolt-action, single-shot, centerfire weapons. These guns have heavy, free-floating, bull-barrels and the front forestock is extremely wide so the weapon can rest on it and remain stable.

Range/Accuracy: Benchrest guns are known for their accuracy and are often referred to as “nail drivers” since they are expected to fire multiple rounds into the same hole. 1/4-inch minute of arc accuracy is expected. Much of this accuracy comes from the high-velocity ammunition they fire; common calibers are the .204, .222, .223, and 6 mm rounds, which can reach velocities of 4000 feet per second and only drop three feet at 500 yards. Benchrest guns have true hair-triggers, some having a pull of only two ounces.

Pors & Cons: Benchrest rifles are without question the most accurate rifles in the world. Also, since there is such a large civilian industry that supports the sport of benchrest shooting, a large variety of benchrest rifles, accessories, and ammunition are available worldwide. Benchrest guns are designed for overt competition shooting, not tactical combat operations. These guns are heavy and can weigh up to fifteen pounds because of the wide stock and the super-heavy barrels. They are not manufactured with open sights or sound suppressors.

Sniper Use: Some American snipers fighting in the Korean War used civilian benchrest target rifles against their Chinese and Korean foes.

Umarex Hammer Carbine .50 Caliber PCP

Production History: Air rifles are popular in many countries for shooting small game, teaching youths the fundamentals of rifle marksmanship, and for competition sport shooting (including an event at the Olympics). Umarex is a U.S. air gun company, just one of many that manufacture weapons in this space. Air rifles have become more popular for hunting game due to lower costs and fewer restrictions than gunpowder rifles.

Description: The Hammer is a semi-bullpup, bolt-action, Pre-Charged Pneumatic (PCP) big bore hunting rifle firing a .510 bullet with a two-round magazine. The rifle is 43.75 inches long with a 29.5-inch barrel and weighs 8.5 pounds. The trigger has a 2.5-pound pull weight. The company also makes a smaller carbine version with an overall length of 34 inches with a 23-inch barrel. The rifle sells for around $1,000.00 depending on the version and if it is new or used.

Range/Accuracy: The Hammer fires a .510 caliber 550 grain lead slug at a velocity of 760 feet per second (FPS) with 700 foot pounds of energy from the barrel. The weapon can also reach 900 FPS velocity with a smaller 350 grain slug. The integral Picatinny rail allows for the mounting of a scope. Accuracy depends on the version of rifle and slug used. Shooters have experienced 5/8” groups at fifty yards and over 2” groups at 75 yards. While other air rifles can fire much smaller rounds at supersonic velocity, the Hammer fires much heavier subsonic rounds.

Pros & Cons: Like many modern high-velocity air rifles, this is a lethal weapon. The Hammer is relatively quiet with no muzzle flash because it is air-powered and is thus inherently hard to detect. Air guns do not leave incriminating shell casings behind like gunpowder weapons. Since most people do not think air guns are lethal, fewer people expect a sniper to use this kind of weapon. Cons: The shooter requires a portable air compressor to charge the air bottle. A full air tank only allows for three full-powered shots.

Savage 220 XP 20 Gauge Rifled Shotgun

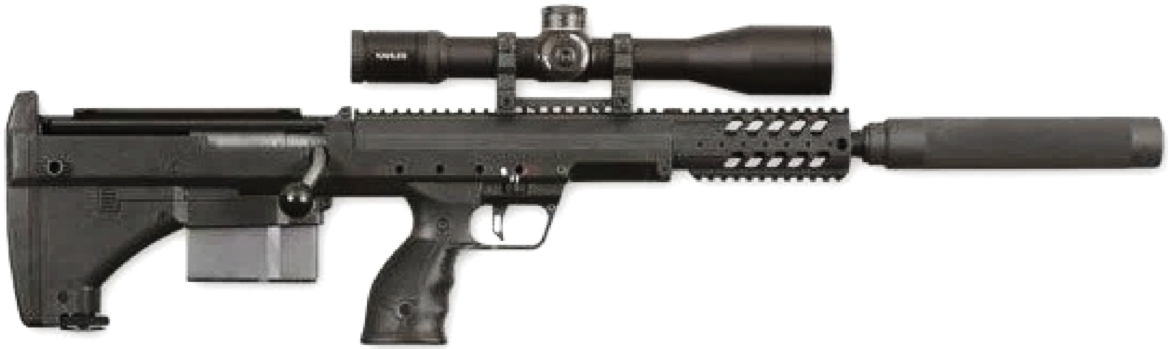
Production History: Shotguns have been around for several hundred years and have been used primarily for hunting small game like rabbits and birds. Hunters eventually transitioned to firing a single, large slug from the smoothbore barrel for larger game. Then, gun designers produced interchangeable chokes which could be inserted into the barrel of the shotgun which offered rifling for the last several inches of the barrel. Also, rifled slugs were developed where the rifling was on the slug itself. Eventually, designers created a shotgun barrel that was truly rifled, referred to as a “slug” barrel.

Description: The Savage 220 XP is a bolt-action weapon firing 20 gauge 2 ¾” and 3” shells. It weighs over eight pounds, is 43-inches long, has a 22-inch barrel and a two-round detachable box magazine. This model comes with a Vortex Crossfire II 3-9x40 scope. The slug gun has evolved to the point where it is more rifle and less shotgun with the only discriminator being that it fires a plastic shell.

Range/Accuracy: The Savage 220 XP shoots just over one-inch groups at 100 yards which puts it in the category with rifles like the Mosin-Nagant (at that range). Many shooters get maximum performance from Remington’s 20 gauge, 260 grain, 2 ¾” AccuTip jacketed sabot slugs with 1,850 fps muzzle velocity. The weapon loses accuracy considerably at 200 yards with spreads of nine inches and more.

Pros & Cons: Shotguns are adaptable weapons and a large variety of aftermarket products are available for them like synthetic, collapsible and folding stocks, scopes, and a wide selection of ammunition and slugs. They fire a large round that is devastating upon impact. Shotguns can be bought legally worldwide with the Savage 220 XP selling for just $799.00. Modern slug guns can definitely be used as a sniper weapon. Cons: Shotguns have a large muzzle flash/blast and is extremely loud. They are not designed to be used in conjunction with a sound suppressor. The shotgun is not designed for long-range shooting and cannot reach far targets like surplus bolt-action rifles or modern assault rifles can.

Desert Tech SRS Covert



Production History: Desert Tactical Arms was formed in 2007 and then rebranded as Desert Tech in 2013. The company is owned by the Kingston family with headquarters in West Valley, Utah. The company specializes in bullpup weapon systems which by design are much shorter than traditional rifles. All of their sniper systems are modular in that they are chambered for a variety of different rounds with removable barrels. In a relatively short time, Desert Tech products have become the preferred weapon systems for many law enforcement agencies and military snipers.

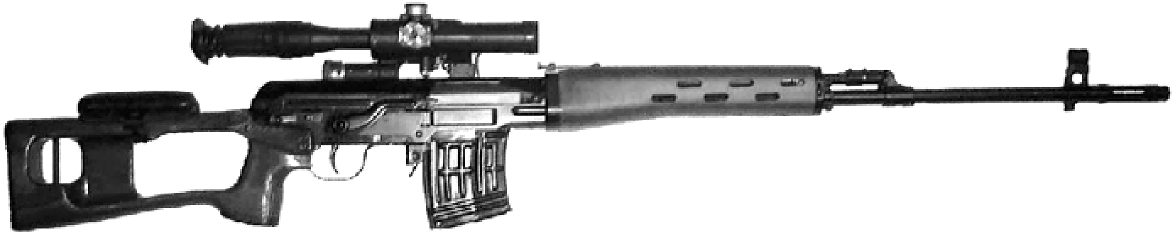
Description: This model is the Stealth Recon Scout (SRS) Covert bolt-action with a 16-inch barrel and chambered in .308 (it is also available in 6.5mm Creedmoor and with an 18-inch barrel). This version weighs over eight pounds with an overall length of 27 inches.

Range/Accuracy: This is the least accurate of their offerings due to the short barrel length. Having said that, Desert Tech guarantees that the SRS shoots 0.5 MOA accuracy at 100 yards with the weapon retaining original zero between barrel changes. The weapon has an adjustable trigger pull as low as 1.5 pounds. Magazines are available in either six or ten-round capacities.

Pros & Cons: This purpose-built urban sniper rifle is considered the industry standard for urban sniping based on engineering quality, concealability and accuracy. The weapon is designed to accept a variety of scopes, suppressors, bipods, and other aftermarket products. The only con is the price with the base model starting at $4,800.00.

Sniper Use: In contravention to an arms embargo since 2014, the Russian military has secured Desert Tech rifles which they have used extensively in the Ukrainian War. Private buyers for the Ukrainian army have also bought unknown numbers of Desert Tech rifles for their own use.

Snayperskaya Vintovka Dragunova (SVD)



Production History: The famous SVD was designed by Evgeniy Fedorovich Dragunov, coming into general issue in 1963 to replace the dated Mosin-Nagant 1891/30 in the marksman role. The SVD is recognized as the world's first purpose-built military precision marksman's rifle.

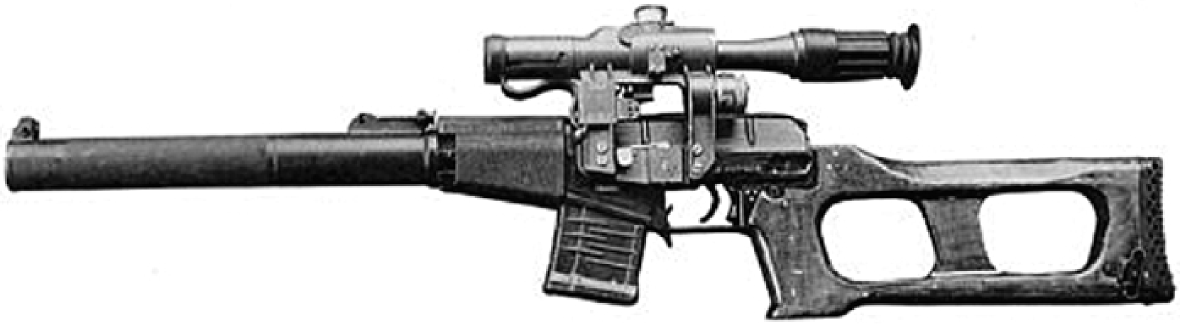
Description: A semi-automatic rifle, fires a 7.62 mm x 54 mm round, fed by a 10-round box magazine, is 49-inches long, with a 24 and 1/2-inch barrel, and weighs approximately ten pounds with the durable, standard issue 4x power PSO-1 scope.

Range/Accuracy: The SVD fires the 7N1 round, a steel-jacketed projectile with an air pocket, steel core, and a lead knocker in the base for maximum terminal effect. A newer, more accurate lead-core 7N14 round consists of a 151-grain projectile which travels at 2,723 fps. The SVD is not an exceptionally accurate rifle and can reasonably expect to achieve two MOA)at 600 meters. The SVD is not as accurate as competing bolt-action rifles due to its semi-automatic action and how this affects its barrel harmonics.

Pros & Cons: The SVD, like all AK variants, is rugged, durable, and battle-tested in the harshest environmental conditions. SVD's are available through-out the Middle East and Eastern Europe and can be bought cheaply on the black market. Every SVD comes with a factory attached flash suppressor. Aftermarket accessories are plentiful. Cons: The SVD is a large, conventional sniper rifle and is not easily concealed. A paratrooper version has a folding stock.

Sniper Use: Since 1994, Chechen snipers used the SVD extensively against invading Russian forces. Iraqi guerrilla snipers used the SVD against invading American forces since 2003. Despite the fact that the SVD is too ungainly for covert, urban sniping, guerrillas use the weapon because it is available, and they modify their tactics to work with their weapon. Russian forces still use the SVD widely in Ukraine despite better options being available.

Vintovka Snayperskaya Spetsialnaya (VSS)



Production History: The VSS "Vintorez" was designed in the late 1980s specifically for Russian special operations forces like the Spetsnaz, MVD, and KGB. The VSS was intended to replace certain AKM/AK-47 weapon systems to give select forces a stealthy sniping capability.

Description: A semi-automatic rifle (is capable of fully-automatic fire), fires a 9x39 mm round, fed by either a 10 or 20-round box magazine, is 36-inches long, with an eight-inch barrel, and weighs eight pounds with a full magazine and the durable, standard issue, 4 x power PSO-1 scope.

Range/Accuracy: The VSS has a maximum effective range of 400 meters, with ranges of 200-300 meters offering the best chance for accurate hits. The VSS fires the SP-6 subsonic cartridge that is based on a 7.62 mm x 39 mm case which has been modified to fit a 9 mm bullet. The SP-6 round has a steel penetrator core and can defeat most soft-body armor at ranges of 300-400 meters.

Pros & Cons: The VSS is a purpose-built urban sniping weapon which is compact and relatively light. The VSS is rugged, proven in combat, is concealable, and has an effective sound-suppressor. Because the VSS fires a subsonic cartridge (meaning the bullet does not break the sound barrier), it is a stealthy weapon and cannot be detected by modern acoustic-based counter sniper systems. Because the VSS can be broken down into three separate parts (buttstock, receiver, integral suppressor/barrel), it is concealable. The VSS fires relatively unique ammunition, rounds are harder to come

Sniper Use: The Russian military used the VSS extensively in Chechnya. Chechen guerrillas captured/purchased significant numbers of the VSS and put them to good effect against their enemy. Russia has used the VSS in Ukraine although it is now dated as it’s been in use for decades. Ukrainian forces have captured significant numbers of these weapons.

M-4A1 Carbine

Production History: The M-4 is a weapon modified from the earlier M-16 series of assault rifles. The M-4 was first produced in 1994 when the U.S. military recognized a need for a more compact, maneuverable, lighter weapon. The M-4 is the standard weapon for U.S. special operations forces.

Description: A semi-automatic rifle, fires a 5.56 mm x 45 mm NATO round, fed by a 30-round box magazine (magazine capacity varies), is 30-inches long with the adjustable stock retracted, has a 14 and 1/2-inch barrel (different barrel lengths can be installed), and weighs approximately five and a half pounds empty.

Range/Accuracy: The M-4 is designed for 3-4 MOA accuracy and fires a hyper-velocity bullet reaching 3,000 feet per second, depending on the ammunition used. The average rifleman can hit man-size targets at 300 meters with open sights, and at 500 meters with a scope.

Pros & Cons: The M-4 is a modular system meaning almost everything can be modified to suit the needs of the environment and the shooter. A large variety of optics and suppressors are available. Because the M-4 is so popular as a military weapon and for recreational shooting, ammunition and spare parts are plentiful worldwide. Cons: The gas-operated system causes chamber fouling from the cartridges' gases and powder. The M-4 action is finicky and jams when dirty.

Sniper Use: U.S. forces have used the M-4 and its variants extensively in the GWOT since 2001. Because the M-4 and its many variants are available worldwide, they are accessible by irregular forces. An EOTECH red dot sight (as seen above) and a suppressor make this an ideal urban sniper system. The upper and lower receiver can be detached quickly for easy concealment.

AK-12

Production History: The AK-12 began service with the Russian army in 2018. It is a fifth-generation version of the original AK-47 that was designed in 1947 by Mikhail Kalishnakov. Many of the earlier proposed Western characteristics of the AK-12 were dropped from prototypes due to budget constraints. Because of overall build quality complaints, the improved AK-12 2023 variant was subsequently issued.

Description: A semi-automatic rifle (also full auto, 2-round burst), fires a 5.45 mm x 39 mm round, fed by a 30-round box magazine, is 36-inches long (depending on the stock), with a 16-inch barrel, and weighs 7.7 pounds empty. The AK-12 is the equivalent of the U.S.' own M-4 in that it is a general purpose assault rifle with similar characteristics. The AK-15 is a sister rifle that is chambered in 7.62 mm x 39 mm.

Range/Accuracy: The AK-12 is designed for 3-4 MOA accuracy with a free-floating barrel to improve accuracy over the AK-74M that it replaced. The AK-12 is a relatively loosely engineered weapon compared to the tightly made M-4. Due to its engineering, soldiers find that consistent round placement is difficult to achieve.

Pros & Cons: The AK-12 can accept any number of scopes, is designed for a suppressor, and can be fitted with a folding stock - all good features for an urban sniping weapon. Cons: Russian soldiers have complained of poor build quality with the stock, fire-selector, fore-grip and the suppressor attachment. The Picatinny rail is loose with rifle optics losing their zero. Consequently, reports indicate many Russian soldiers prefer to use the AK-74M instead.

Sniper Use: The Russian army ordered 150,000 units which saw initial service in Syria. The AK-12 has been used extensively in Ukraine, especially in urban warfare like the assaults on Soledar, Bakhmut, and Avdiivka where it has been pressed into ad hoc urban sniping use.

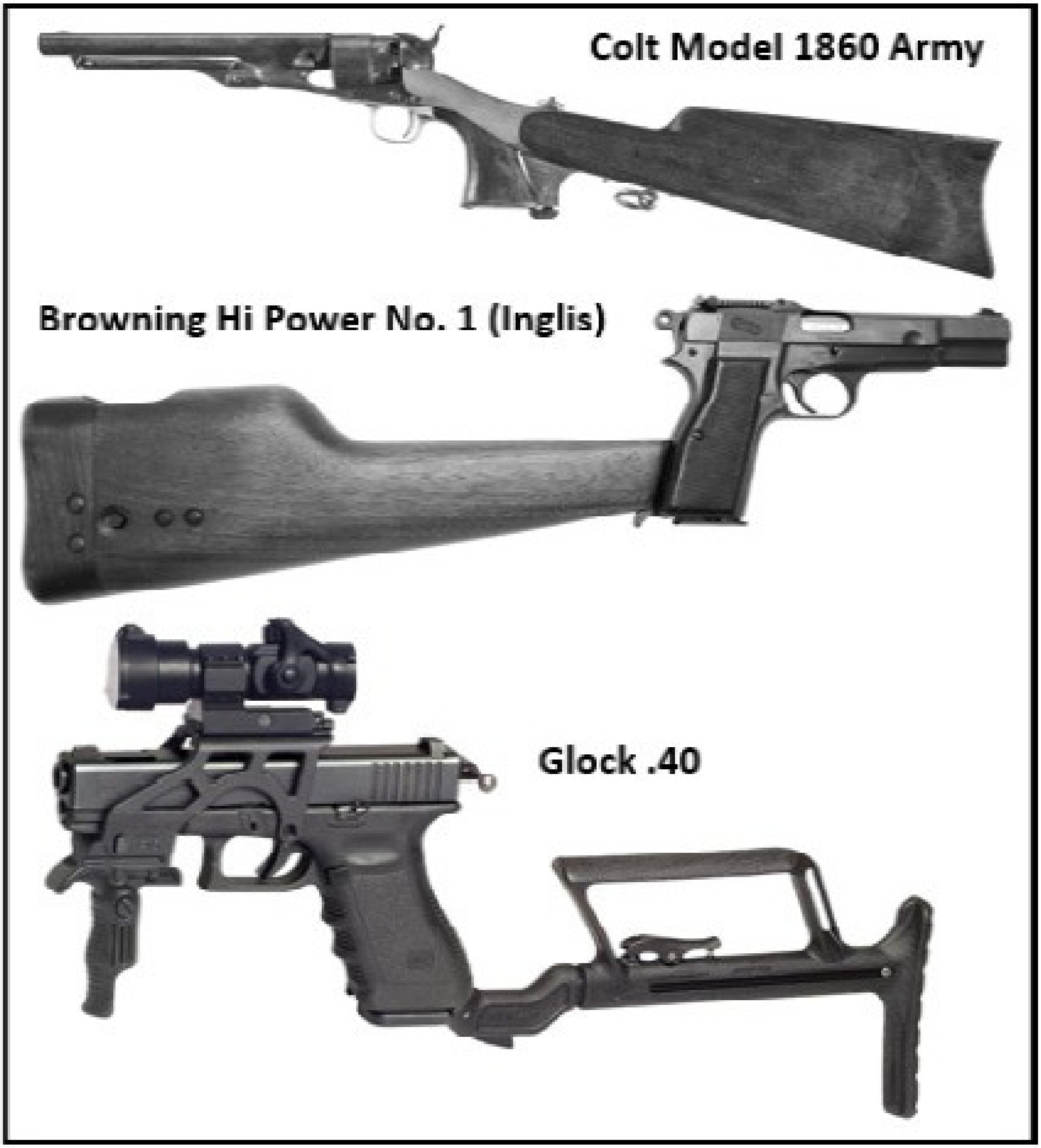
Handguns As Sniper Weapons

A handgun can be an effective sniper weapon for a variety of reasons. First, a pistol is concealable and can be hidden on one's person. A pistol can fit in the small of your back or under your armpit – a full-length bolt-action sniper rifle cannot. And depending on the situation, concealability may be the most important consideration. Second, a pistol is maneuverable in the restricted confines of the urban environment. A pistol can be fired from inside a car, from a closet, from a stairwell, from under a bed, and in any number of unpredictable places and positions a shooter may find themselves in while operating in a city. Perhaps the best reason for employing a handgun for sniping is that people do not expect a precision shooter to use one.

When I first talked to people about using a handgun for sniping, most were skeptical. However, after I explained to them exactly how one could employ a handgun for sniping, I appeared a little less imbalanced, but just slightly so. When people think of a pistol cartridge, they think of some weak, low-velocity round that is accurate out to 50 meters. But, with the production of new pistols and their accompanying cartridges, the old, weak, 50-meter pistol round is dead. If we consider that some big-game pistols actually fire a rifle cartridge, using a pistol for sniping becomes less comical. These specialized hunting pistols can bring down large game, like deer and elk, at hundreds of meters. A handgun suitable for sniping does not have to be an ungainly specialized weapon. For example, the Israeli Desert Eagle .50, which is a "normal" style handgun, fires a hard-hitting round out to two hundred meters.

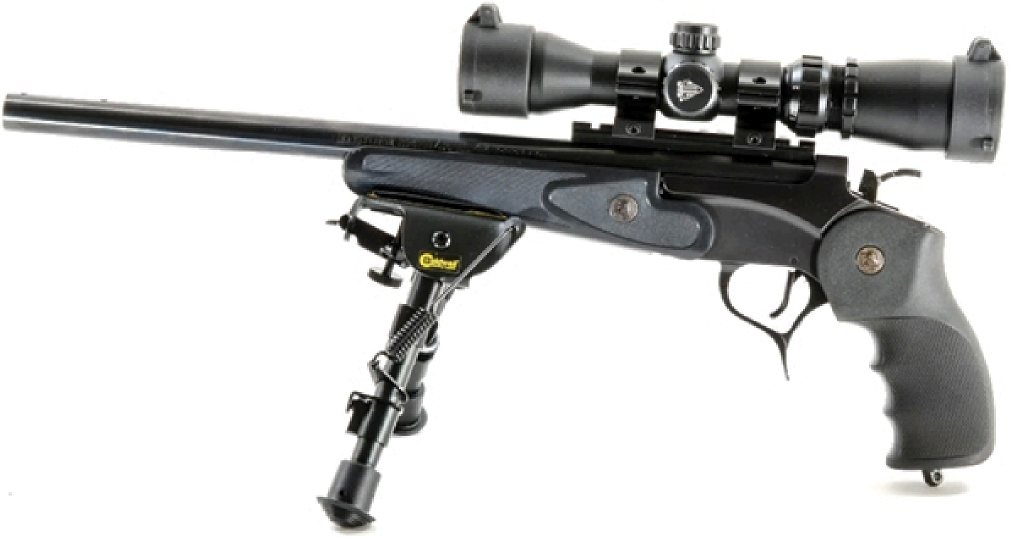
Truthfully, a shooter does not need an immensely powerful round for effective handgun sniping. One of the primary reasons why one cannot accurately fire a handgun at long distances is due to traditional, unmodified handgun stances and tactics. Since most people practice firing handguns from a standing position, it is the shooter's own inability to hold the gun steady enough to be accurate at long distances that limits them as a sniper. But, accurate long-distance handgun shooting can take place, even with normal handguns, if the shooter modifies their tactics and equipment.

To start, the shooter has to rest the weapon on a stable platform, like a windowsill or a car door. Pistols with a tactical rail system can be fitted with a bipod to allow a stable firing position no matter where the shooter is. Also, a pistol can be fitted with a shoulder stock, which is either commercially available (depending on the handgun) or can be fabricated easily by using an existing rifle stock and some sheet metal. This combination of using a stable shooting platform and a rigid stock allows for a much more accurate shot. Since a handgun’s open sights have such a short sight radius, the firer can attach a scope using a commercially available mount. The shooter can even use a longer barrel for improved accuracy and then attach a sound suppressor. So, after modifying the pistol with a bipod, adding a shoulder stock, mounting a scope, and attaching a suppressor, the shooter has created a sniping weapon - more closely resembling a carbine - capable of accurate shots out to one hundred meters or more, depending on the ammunition used and the handgun itself.


Colt Model 1860 Army
Browning Hi Power No. 1 (Inglis)
Glock .40

Above are just several examples of how shooters have tried to get more accuracy and range from their pistols. Adding a stock is one of the most common conversions when trying to improve on an existing handgun. We've seen this modification as far back as the American Civil War, where soldiers attached custom made stocks to their Colt revolvers. Eventually, gun manufacturers produced carbines, which fired a pistol round but had all the other characteristics of a rifle.

Thompson Encore .223



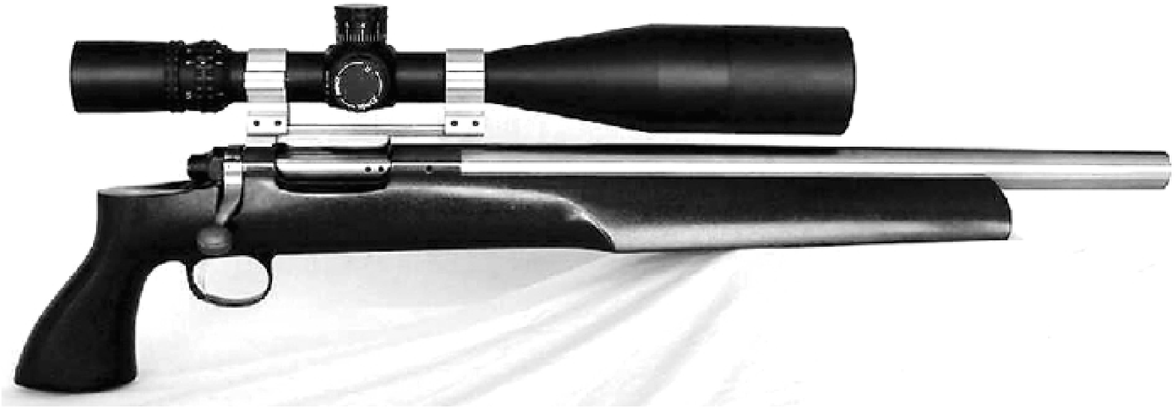
Production History: In 1965, the Thompson/Center Arms Company was created and in 1967 they began selling their Contender high-performance hunting handgun. Unlike most others, their products were designed for interchangeable barrels and their break-open design does not require the barrels to be specially fitted to the individual action. Any barrel made for their line of target pistols will fit onto any frame.

Description: A break-open action pistol, fires a variety of rounds to include: .17, .22LR, .223, .204 Ruger, 6.8 mm Remington, 7-30 Waters, 30/30, .357 Magnum, .35 Remington, .375 JDJ, .44 Magnum, .45 Colt/.410 Ga, and .45/.70 Gov cartridges, is 17-inches long (model dependent), with a variety of barrel lengths to include 10, 12, 14, 16, 21 inches, and weighs up to four pounds, depending on the type of barrel.

Range/Accuracy: Depends on what caliber barrel is used, its length, and what cartridge is fired. The Encore in .223 with a 14-inch barrel is capable of sub-MOA accuracy at 100 yards, better than some rifles.

Pros & Cons: The Encore is an effective urban sniping weapon because of its flexibility. Many different stocks (collapsible ones as well) are available, as are aftermarket sound suppressors. The large variety of barrel lengths in different calibers allows the shooter to tailor the weapon to a specific tactical situation. While the Encore is single shot, this allows for improved accuracy and enables the shooter to maintain control of their expended cartridge since it is not automatically extracted. However, this is a single-shot weapon so it cannot rapidly engage multiple targets.

Benchrest Pistols



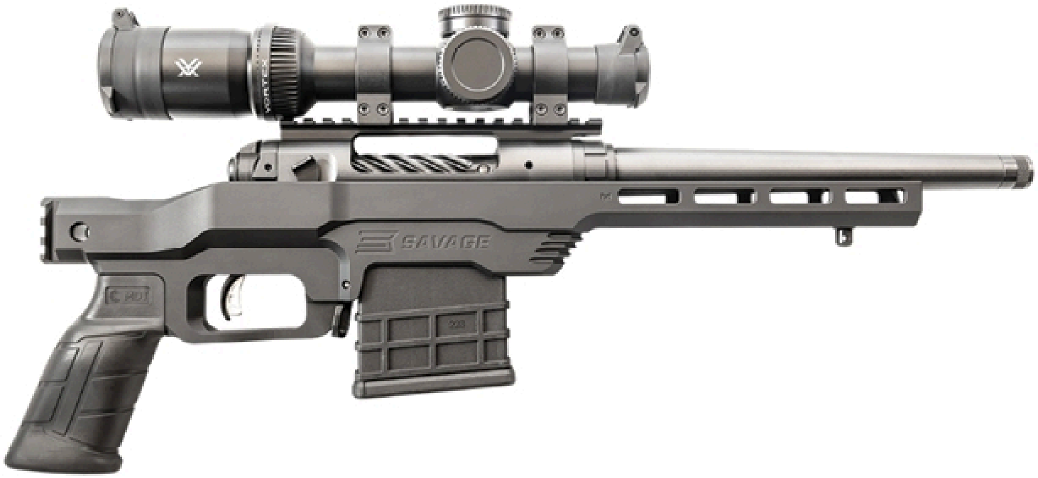
Production History: Benchrest pistols evolved from benchrest rifles and both are now used in modern benchrest competitions as well as for varmint hunting. Benchrest pistols are generally produced by custom manufacturers who specialize in benchrest weapons. These pistols are relatively expensive and uncommon as compared to traditional handguns.

Description: Dimensions vary depending on the model. Most benchrest pistols are custom-made where a shooter selects a specific action, chooses a barrel (with a specific length), and then selects a stock and combines them. Benchrest pistols are bolt-action, single-shot, and centerfire. These pistols have heavy, free-floating, bull-barrels and the front fore stock is extremely wide so the weapon can rest on it and remain stable.

Range/Accuracy: Benchrest pistols are designed from the ground up for superior accuracy and are expected to fire multiple rounds into the same hole. A good benchrest pistol can easily achieve sub-MOA accuracy and are more accurate than even contemporary hunting rifles. Much of this accuracy comes from the high-velocity ammunition they fire. Common calibers are the .204, .222, .223, and 6 mm rounds, which can reach velocities in excess of 4000 feet per second and only drop three feet at 500 yards.

Pros & Cons: Benchrest pistols are without question the most accurate handguns in the world. Also, since there is such a large civilian market/industry that supports the sport of bench shooting, a large variety of benchrest pistol accessories and ammunition are available. Even though benchrest pistols are large compared to other handguns, they are still much smaller than an assault rifle and are thus easily concealed. Cons: Benchrest pistols are designed for overt competition shooting, not tactical combat operations. Since they are bolt-action single-shot weapons they cannot be used to rapidly engage multiple targets.

Savage 110 PCS Precision Chassis System



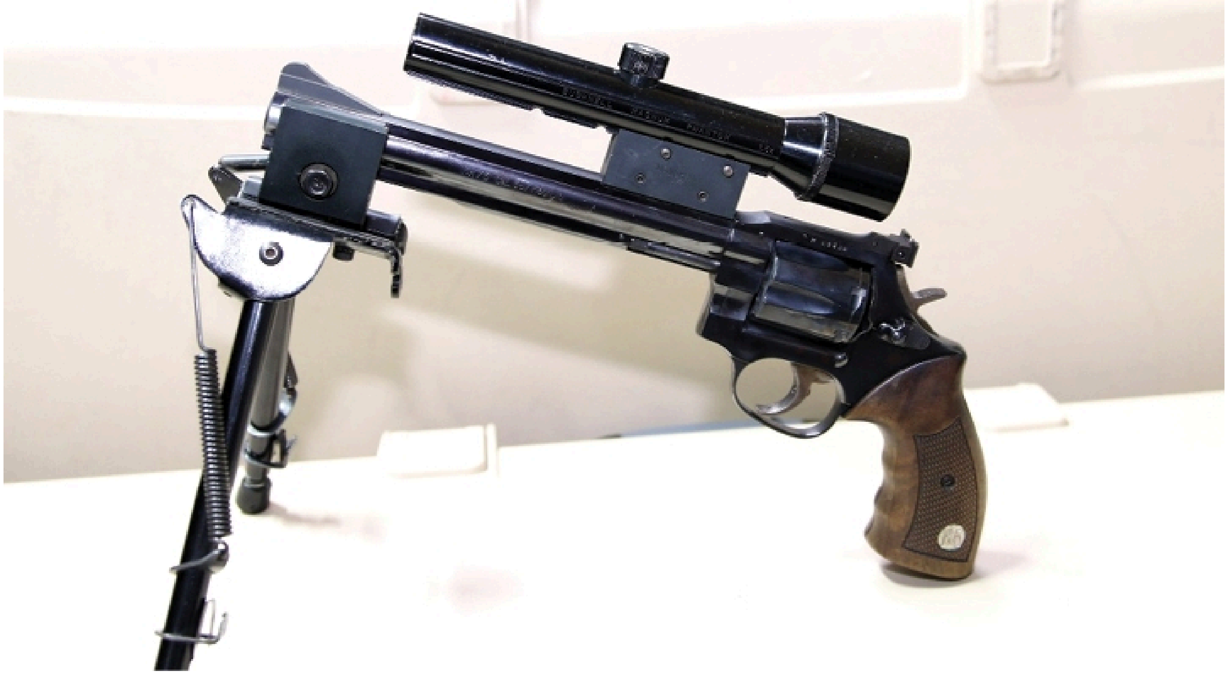
Production History: Savage Arms was founded in 1894 in Utica, NY and began producing the Model 110 bolt-action hunting rifle in 1958. This is the oldest continuously produced rifle in America. The company started manufacturing the 110 PCS in 2021 based on the action of their tried and tested rifle action. The Savage 110 BA tactical sniper rifle in .300 Winchester Magnum and .338 Lapua Magnum is used widely by Ukrainian snipers in their war against Russia.

Description: A bolt-action pistol, 21-inches long, a 10.5-inch barrel, weighs 5.6 pounds empty with a detachable 10-round box magazine. The weapon can be chambered in .223, 6.5 mm, .300, .308, and .350. It accepts a Picatinny rail for mounting scopes. It has a threaded barrel for attaching a suppressor. The weapon sells for around $1,000.00.

Range/Accuracy: Depends on what caliber barrel is used, its length, and what cartridge is fired. The .300 BLK is capable of shooting 1 MOA groups at 100 yards. Accuracy can be improved by adjusting its AccuTrigger and attaching a folding stock. The pistol has a free-floating barrel to reduce vibrations and increase accuracy. The bolt-action is positioned on the left side of the weapon so that right-handed shooters can maintain their sight picture and grip while reloading.

Pros & Cons: There is no better system for a close-in urban sniping weapon if we factor in concealability. Unlike other pistols, the Savage 110 PCS has a ten-round magazine so the shooter can maintain a high-volume of fire if needed. Rounds like the .223 and .308 are widely available.

Manhurin MR 73



Production History: Manhurin (*Manufacture de Machines du Haut-Rhin*) is a brand owned by French company Chapuis Arms. The company began manufacturing handguns in 1952 and produced the MR 73 in 1972 for police tactical units and was the standard issue firearm for the National Gendarmie.

Description: A double-action/single-action revolver chambered in .38 Special, .357 magnum, and 9 mm. The weapon parts are made from extremely hardened ordnance-certified steel. The MR 73 is made with barrels ranging from 2.5 inches to 10 inches.

Range/accuracy: Each pistol is considered to have match-grade accuracy and is test-fired at the factory and is guaranteed 20 mm accuracy at 25 meters or it is not shipped to customers. In a close range urban hostage rescue or barricaded subject environment, the accuracy is acceptable.

Pros & Cons: Since revolvers use a cylinder-type magazine, when a round is fired, it stays securely in the chamber so the shooter can maintain positive control of their expended cartridges. A revolver is inherently more accurate than a semi-automatic pistol because the action on the revolver does not move when it is fired.

Sniper Use: The MR 73 is deeply embedded in French law-enforcement culture with both GIGN and RAID (both are national police CT units) using the pistol extensively for precision urban shooting during the course of thousands of counterterrorism operations.

Case Study: The Ohio Highway Sniper

Deranged killer, Charles A. McCoy, Jr. understood the urban terrain and took advantage of it to terrorize the people of Columbus, Ohio from October 2003 until his capture in March 2004. Importantly, McCoy was able to spread this terror with nothing more than a 9 mm Beretta pistol. Over the course of five months, McCoy conducted a dozen separate shootings against highway drivers, residences, and even an elementary school. Many of the attacks involved McCoy standing on a highway overpass as he fired down at oncoming cars. Since McCoy was on an overpass with no available entrances or exits, he was able to fire a shot, walk to his nearby car, and quickly drive off without anyone being able to pursue him.

In response to the shootings, Ohio commuters stopped driving on Interstate 270 that circles the city of Columbus. Instead, they took back roads. After an attack on a school, some schools cancelled their classes while others remained open but held their recesses indoors to protect the children from an easy, outside shot. In hopes of catching the shooter on film, the state of Ohio installed surveillance cameras at likely sniper locations along Interstate 270. Police also set up public hotlines (they received thousands of tips) and put a $60,000 bounty on the sniper’s head. However, since there was no evidence to go on, the shooter could have been any one person out of several hundred thousand living in the surrounding areas. The shooter was literally swallowed up by the surrounding population.

Eventually, the police got a break when they received a call from a relative of McCoy who identified Charles, suffering from paranoid schizophrenia and off his medication, as the probable shooter. Then, McCoy’s father turned over to police four of his son’s guns, including two Beretta 9 mm pistols. After test firing these pistols, the police conclusively linked one of the Berettas to nine of the shootings, including the murder of Gail Knisley, a 62 year-old woman who was killed as a friend drove her to a doctor’s appointment on I-270. Now that the police had a suspect, they involved the community by posting pictures and descriptions of McCoy in newspapers and on the internet.

This public exposure brought quick results. McCoy was captured thirty-six hours later in Las Vegas after an alert citizen, Conrad Malsom, recognized him from a picture in a copy of USA Today. Malsom immediately notified the sniper investigation task force in Columbus as well as the FBI. The police arrested McCoy, peacefully, when he returned to the Budget Suites where he was staying. While McCoy's identity was unknown, he was able to manipulate the urban and human terrain to his advantage and inflict terror throughout a large urban area, armed only with a handgun. Once McCoy's anonymity was stripped from him, this same urban and human terrain worked against him, leading to his exposure and arrest. In 2005, McCoy was sentenced to 27 years in prison with no chance of parole.

Case Study: The Warsaw Ghetto Liquidation

In the summer of 1943, the Jews trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto, armed primarily with pistols, prepared for battle against their German executioners. The Jews were so poorly armed due to the Germans' effective system of gun control. This gun control started in 1928 when Germany's Weimar Government enacted the Law on Firearms and Ammunition that required all German citizens to apply for a permit in order to buy a firearm, to purchase ammunition, or to go hunting.

From then on, every firearm had to be stamped with a serial number and an identifying mark by the manufacturer so the government could track these weapons. As a result, when the Nazi regime came to power in 1933, they had a complete database listing the owners of all the legally held firearms in the country. Armed with this knowledge, the Nazis were able to remove any legally owned weapon from any strata of society appearing to be a threat to the Reich. Then, further gun control followed when the Nazis issued the Weapons Law of 1938 which stated, "Jews are prohibited from acquiring, possessing, and carrying firearms and ammunition."

Polish Jews are rounded up and marched off to execution during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

As matter of course, after Germany invaded and occupied Poland in 1939, the new occupying administration dutifully enforced all the racial laws previously instituted in the Reich. From that point on, Poland’s Jews were outlawed from buying, owning, or possessing any handgun or rifle. Firearms possession was illegal and any violator would most likely be shot on the spot (why put Jewish violators in the court system when they were doomed to perish as a race anyways?) or they would be shipped off to work camps or crematoriums. Any one of these options was a death sentence. Even the Jewish police, who were responsible for maintaining law and order behind the walls of the Ghetto, were armed only with wooden sticks. As the Warsaw Ghetto Jews prepared for an urban guerrilla war in the spring of 1943, they were confronted with the harsh fact there were almost no guns available for them. The only weapons the Jews could get through the black market and the Polish underground were a few dozen pistols.

Compounding the problem was the fact the Polish resistance was preparing for their own uprising, which finally came in the summer of

1944. However, as the Jews and Poles competed for weapons on the black market, the Polish underground secured the lion's share of these limited, valuable commodities. The Poles were unwilling to give up their precious few weapons, like rifles and submachine guns, to the Jews who, clearly, had no hope for victory or even survival. Even though the Jews did not want to rely on their absurdly low number of handguns for their survival, they had to.

When the German Army moved in to liquidate the remaining Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto in April of 1943, they encountered several guerrilla organizations armed almost exclusively with pistols. The most well-known of these resistance groups was the ZOB (Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa – Polish for the Jewish Fighting Organization). The ZOB was armed largely with handguns because it was next to impossible to buy larger weapons, like rifles or submachine guns, on the black market. Because the ZOB fought from the close confines of a dense, urban area, they were still effective using handguns.

Convicted war criminal SS-Brigadefuhrer Jurgen Stroop was the commander on the scene responsible for reducing the Warsaw Ghetto. Stroop's task was to clean out the Ghetto by forcibly transporting the Jews to Treblinka or slave labor camps. Any resisting Jews were killed outright. However, Stroop's 1,500 well-armed men encountered fierce resistance from Jewish guerrillas. During the initial fighting Stroop reported, "The Jews responded with grenades and automatic fire aimed at our gun crews. The snipers must have been low on ammunition because they made each shot count. They managed to kill two of our light artillery men [anti-aircraft gunners]."

Armed only with pistols, the Jewish guerrillas denied the Germans access to key areas in the Ghetto. Again, Stroop reported, "The second thing that struck me that Thursday was our inability to capture Jews and Poles who had fled to the sewers beneath the Ghetto. These 'catacombs' made excellent secret passages and ambush sites, and the Jews thwarted all our efforts to flood them. The few SS men who went underground were met with pistol fire. Smoke candles and the addition of creosote to the water also proved ineffectual. We never did gain control of those sewers."

Another Stroop report described the fierce resistance put up by the pistol-wielding Jews, “In most cases the Jews offered armed resistance before they left the bunkers. We had two men wounded. Some of the Jews and bandits fired pistols from both hands. Since we discovered today that on several occasions Jewesses had concealed pistols in their bloomers, every Jew and bandit will from now on be ordered to strip completely and be searched.”

Russian collaborators observe dead jews killed during the Warsaw Ghetto liquidation.

It took the Germans twenty-eight days to clear out and destroy the Warsaw Ghetto. In the end, the Germans captured only nine rifles but secured fifty-nine pistols. Stroop was at a loss to explain how his men, armed with anti-aircraft guns, howitzers, armored cars, Mauser sniper rifles, and machine-guns took so long to defeat such a lightly armed enemy composed of starving men, untrained women, and young teenagers. The Jewish guerrillas violated every traditional concept of sniping but still stalled the Germans for an entire month.

To put this feat in perspective, it took the Germans five-weeks to conquer all of Poland in 1939. It took them four weeks to destroy the Warsaw Ghetto, which covered only four square kilometers and was inhabited by some 60,000 wretched terrorized Jews. The Jewish guerrillas were forced by necessity to use the weapons at their disposal, combining handguns with unconventional tactics to exploit the urban terrain to their advantage.

In the end, the Warsaw Ghetto Jews paid a horrific price. More than 56,000 Jews were forced out of the Ghetto by Stroop and his men. Of these, 7,000 were killed during the operation. Another 7,000 of those captured were sent to Treblinka where they were stripped, gassed, and cremated. Stroop estimated his men burned, blew up, and buried alive another 5,000 to 6,000 Jews during the course of their urban combat. This inexact estimate is understandable when one considers Stroop burned down entire city blocks filled with screaming Jews and blew up hundreds of underground bunkers occupied by unknown numbers of still more terrified victims.

Once the battle, or more aptly, the massacre began, the Jews fought fiercely to secure more guns from the assaulting German soldiers. By dragging the rifles from the bodies of dead German soldiers, the Jews were able to get a few more rifles here and there. Because the Jews could not get guns, legally or illegally, they could not defend themselves from the German onslaught. The Nazi's bureaucratic war-machine so effectively kept guns out of Jewish hands that they were able to slaughter the disarmed Jewish citizenry with great success.

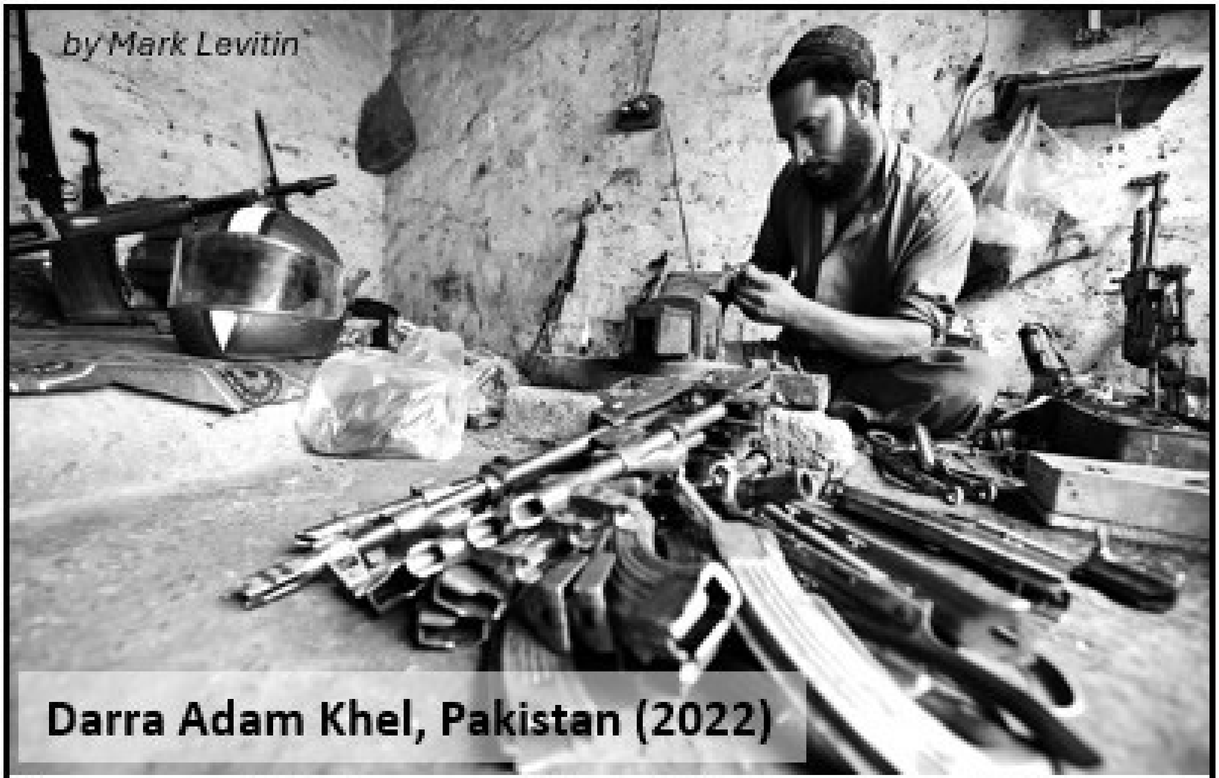
Guerrilla Gunsmithing

As we can see, a guerrilla organization may not have the luxury to pick and choose the weapons they will fight with. Most likely, the organization will have to modify or make their own custom-made weapons, which is relatively easy with a basic understanding of gunsmithing and access to a machine-shop or home workshop. Additionally, gunsmithing books and magazines are widely available as are online videos showing how to do basic gun maintenance and repairs. Once one has a basic understanding of gunsmithing, welding, and metal-cutting, they can modify existing weapons at will. One can cut barrels to shorter lengths, make suppressors and flash-hiders, make scope mounts, and create stocks. One can also learn to mix and match different parts from different weapons systems to create a hybrid weapon.

For example, the IRA had its own custom weapon shops where they designed everything from unconventional mortar systems to complex IEDs and car bombs. Snipers from a variety of wars mixed and matched scopes, rifle barrels, and stocks to try and create a better weapon. For instance, American gun designers, who created the first .50 caliber sniper rifles, put a .50 caliber machine-gun barrel on a German anti-tank gun frame to create a long-range sniper rifle. If a guerrilla organization is unable to produce or modify their own weapon systems, they can contract this out, on the black market, to someone who can. With enough money, they can pay someone who is an expert in their field to custom-smith a specific accessory to their weapon or modify it to make it concealable or quiet.

The modifications the shooter requires for their weapon may not even involve any gunsmithing or shop work but merely adding an accessory like a stock or a rail mounting system. Since there is a large, commercial, aftermarket industry that serves the needs of hunters and shooting enthusiasts worldwide, a shooter can get anything they want for their weapon, like folding stocks and compact scopes, from any number of places such as the internet (eBay, Amazon.com), and popular publications like Shotgun News and online stores like Cabela’s and Brownells just to name a few. On the web, getting spare parts and exotic accessories is both easy and anonymous, requiring only a credit card and a postage box.

This cursory review of available sniper weapons was meant to open the reader’s mind to the possible tools for effective sniping. There are many more tools available than just conventional, bolt-action, long guns that are commonly used by the world’s militaries and police forces. The guerrilla sniper may not have the luxury to use the expected norm like their conventional enemy. They must adapt to their battlefield conditions, take what is available, and modify them to suit their needs.



by Mark Levitin

Darra Adam Khel, Pakistan (2022)

The unregulated gunsmiths in this town provide weapons to all comers on the black market to include the Taliban, ISIS, and Al-Qaeda.

Chapter 5

Snipercraft

The urban guerrilla sniper is the kind of fighter especially suited for ambush because he can hide easily in the irregularities of the terrain, on the roofs and tops of buildings and apartments under construction. From windows, dark places, he can take careful aim at his chosen target.

-Carlos Marighella, "Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla"

Guerrilla Snipercraft: Getting Weapons

A guerrilla's snipercraft involves areas the traditional sniper never thinks about, but which are just as critical as the camouflage they use, the hide site they choose, and the weapon they shoot. The first challenge for the guerrilla sniper is getting a weapon in a secure manner. Because the guerrilla is an outlaw committing a crime against the state, government security forces will enforce strict gun control measures to keep weapons out of their hands. That is why it was important to discuss, as we did in the previous chapter, the different types of weapons suitable for sniping because the guerrilla has to make do with whatever they can get. Let us take a look at what measures a government may take to limit the distribution of weapons in a country and how this gun control affects the guerrilla.

One year after the Jewish guerrillas were crushed in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Polish Home Army in Warsaw ignited their own uprising. The Polish resistance hoped to seize and hold Warsaw in order to link up with the surging Red Army clawing its way forward to the Polish capital. From August 1 until October 2, 1944, the Polish insurgents fought a brutal urban guerrilla war against the occupying Germans. Because the Home Army had a wider support base and was larger in size than the Ghetto Jews, they secured more supplies and weapons for the fight.

Even though the insurgents had relatively few weapons to start with, they were able to attack and capture enough surprised German garrisons to secure more arms. In this manner, the Home Army captured everything from Mauser K98 rifles and MP40 submachine guns to armored half-tracks and Panther heavy tanks. Also, the Home Army received some weapons through airdrops from British, American, and Russian aircraft, although these supply runs were costly to the allies and the results were sporadic at best.

Polish fighters in Warsaw display PIAT anti-tank weapons air-dropped by the British in 1944.

The battlefield recovery of weapons, as Warsaw's insurgent were able to do, was beneficial from a security perspective because once the guerrillas had these guns, they were "clean" - they could not be traced back to a specific person. The guns could be traced to the police station or the military unit that was issued the guns, but the link in the evidence chain stopped there once the insurgents took off with their loot. Now, the government had no idea who had their guns. They were effectively laundered.

While battlefield recovery of weapons can be a dangerous proposition, there are other less risky ways to get a firearm. One such method is to steal a firearm from a gun store, weapons depot, or a private residence. It is certainly less risky to break and enter into a store or someone's house than it is to go toe-to-toe in a gun battle with the police or army. Breaking and entering can be made easier, and involve no risk at all, if the guerrillas have someone on the inside helping them.

For example, a secret supporter of the IRA could legally buy a deer rifle and then arrange for its "theft". When the IRA entered their supporter's house and took the weapon in the dead of night, complete with a broken window or other evidence of a break in, the police had a hard time proving this was not a legitimate case of robbery. This way, the existing laws could be used to legally purchase a weapon and then illegally supply the guerrillas.

As mentioned previously, guerrillas often work with black market arms dealers to get the weapons they need. This has the advantage of reducing the guerrillas' risk in some ways because the arms dealer is also committing an illegal act. With an arms dealer, the guerrillas do not have to kill anybody or steal anything, all they need is money. It is up to the arms dealer to get the weapons in a secure, anonymous manner if they want to stay out of prison. However, the guerrillas must accept the risk that the arms dealer may be setting them up.

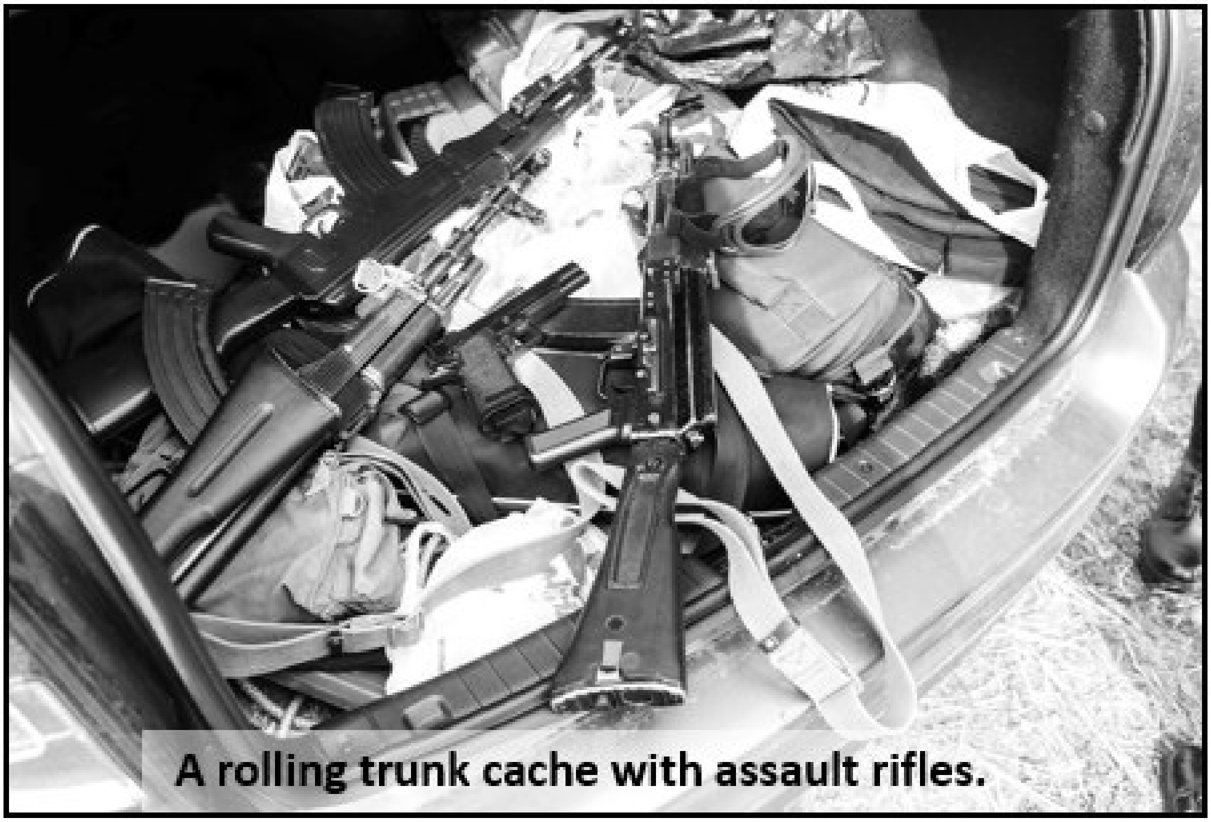
If they are being set up, the guerrillas may be placed under surveillance by government security forces when they meet with the dealer. Security forces can then follow the guerrillas from their meeting place with the dealer and track them back to their homes, safehouses, or bases. Or security forces may place hidden tracking devices inside the guns themselves. For instance, at various times during their struggle, the IRA's arms network was infiltrated by police informers both in the United States and Ireland itself. In these cases, American and British undercover police became adept at "tagging" the IRA's weapons with miniature, hidden tracking devices so they could follow the weapons trail to the final end user – the guerrilla.

The guerrilla organization takes into consideration all of these possibilities and determines what risks they want to take. Ultimately, it might be safer for the guerrillas to attack and raid an unprotected police station, knowing they are not being set up, as opposed to dealing with an unknown element like an arms dealer.

Hiding the Weapon

Once a guerrilla has secured their weapon in such a way it cannot be traced to them, they have other hurdles to master. Now, they must store their weapon so government security forces cannot find it, and if they do find it, they cannot connect the weapon to them. There are an endless number of ways of hiding a weapon, but there are a few things guerrillas must avoid. First, the experienced guerrilla never stores their illegal weapon for long-term safekeeping in their own house or on their property. This is a rookie mistake a novice guerrilla might make because it is convenient, but this is the first place security forces check. No matter how clever a person thinks they are, if security forces want to make the effort, they can tear a building apart until they find what they are looking for. Especially with the advent of portable x-ray machines and ground penetrating radar devices, government forces, just like Superman, actually have the ability to see through walls and floors. And if an illegal weapon is found in a person's home or business, the property owner is now legally connected to the weapon.

The same can be said of a person's car. While it is understandable the guerrilla transports their weapon in a vehicle from time to time, experienced ones do not store it in their own car for the same reasons they do not keep it in their home. Mass murderers Lee Malvo and John Mohammad (the DC Snipers) made the mistake of being caught with their assault rifle in the trunk of their car, resulting in a life sentence for Malvo and the death penalty for Mohammad. Guerrilla snipers operating in a wartime environment also face the same prospects of life and death sentences.



A rolling trunk cache with assault rifles.

The IRA understood hiding their weapons was a critical task so they appointed specialists who did nothing but hide and transport weapons in a secure manner. Why let an untrained novice expose the whole organization through sloppy tradecraft? The IRA's specialists often hid their weapons in public places owned by the government or public businesses (like inside an enclosed power relay box), so there was no incriminating link between the weapon and the sniper if the weapon was discovered. Disciplined guerrilla organizations like the IRA plan for the eventuality of their weapons being discovered, but by hiding them in an anonymous manner, the repercussions are minimal.

In Iraq, the insurgents became fond of hiding their weapons in the trunks of cars, something termed "rolling caches.". Furthermore, the cars were stolen and could not be traced to a specific individual. The cars were parked in public places like parking lots or city streets, thus they were not on private property and could not be connected to a private citizen. These rolling caches allowed the insurgents to hide their weapons in an anonymous manner with no incriminating links to the guerrilla organization if the arms caches were discovered.

Guerrilla Sniper Training

Once the guerrilla secures and hides their weapon anonymously, they still must train with it before they can conduct an attack. The guerrilla shooter may have to zero their weapon and test their ammunition, as well as, practicing the fundamentals of effective shooting like: proper trigger squeeze, breath control, sight picture, target alignment, and body positioning. Because of the combination of the security forces' control measures and an intrusive populace, sniper training must take place in a clandestine manner. Because sniper training in the cities is difficult does not mean it is impossible. With a little creativity, good sniper training can be conducted even in a sprawling city with millions of people living in close proximity to each other.

One way guerrilla organizations get trained snipers into their ranks is through recruitment. If an organization can recruit someone who is already trained as a sniper in the police or military, they can bypass the lengthy and dangerous process of clandestine training. When the IRA stepped up its attacks in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they benefited from employing snipers who had already received training in the British military as British soldiers. Even Sean MacStiofain, a senior IRA commander, received weapons training from the British Royal Air Force before he returned to civilian life. He took a course teaching the fundamentals of marksmanship and weapons handling while still a member of the British military. Even though MacStiofain was not an active member of the IRA at the time, he knew this training would come in handy in the future.

If a guerrilla organization cannot recruit a trained sniper into the movement, then they can buy one. For years, the PLO greased the palms of foreign shooters who were imported into the occupied territories to bag unwary Israeli soldiers. Iraqi insurgents did the same, paying for the services of foreign snipers to work in Iraq as guns for hire, getting paid by the kill. The Chechen guerrilla movement also exploited the services of foreign snipers from the Baltics, the Ukraine, and from various Islamic groups throughout the Middle East who were paid good money to pick off Russian soldiers.

Open Source Training

If the guerrilla sniper cannot be hired or recruited, they can be taught the old fashioned way. The first step in urban guerrilla sniper training is the same as a college student researching a term paper. An IRA member can go onto Amazon.com and buy Mark Lonsdale's *Sniper, Counter-Sniper* to study the subject. A guerrilla in Ramadi, Iraq can order Jack Coughlin's book *Shooter* from Barnes and Noble to learn exactly how American Marine snipers killed his fellow countrymen in the beginning of the war. A Chechen rebel can order Vassili Zaitsev's book *Notes of a Sniper* and study urban sniper tactics from the great, Russian master himself.

To highlight the fact guerrilla snipers study available open sources, an Iraqi insurgent video released in late 2006 discussed some of their training methods. In the video, the insurgents revealed they copied passages from a book written by sniping expert and author John Plaster. According to them, the guerrillas bought Plaster's book *The Ultimate Sniper* and then took what they needed from his manual to train their own snipers. (In response, John Plaster offered to download his chapter on counter-sniping for free.) As we can see, the internet is a tool guerrillas use to learn about the sniper trade and it is both legal and anonymous. Besides ordering various sniper publications from internet book dealers, a guerrilla sniper can enter any number of internet chatrooms and discuss sniper tactics with other interested people and actual snipers.

A screenshot from the *Sniper's Elite* video game.

Movies are another medium the guerrilla sniper can study to learn the trade. A guerrilla can go to any local DVD store and for a few dollars buy *Enemy at the Gates*, *Shot Through the Heart*, and *Sniper* to get new ideas. Or, they can watch the best urban guerrilla sniper training movie ever made, *Day of the Jackal* by Frederick Forsyth, which spins a fictional story of an English sniper hired by the French Secret Army Organization (OAS) to assassinate French President De Gaulle. Day of the Jackal shows how to conduct a textbook guerrilla urban sniping operation from start to finish, complete with methods of how to custom-smith and hide the perfect urban sniping weapon. Also, personal videos shot by actual guerrilla snipers are another source of knowledge. Iraqi insurgents in particular (as we discussed in chapter three) were unusually adept at merging their sniper operations with actual footage of their attacks and then distributing the footage through the internet and black market street corner sales. These “how-to” videos are in fact the most realistic, current sniper training films made to date.

An often overlooked form of sniper training can be found in first-person shooter video games made for personal computers, Sony PlayStations, and Nintendo. Any game like *Rainbow Six*, *Ghost Recon*, *Call of Duty* or *Sniper Elite* offers a person the chance to learn the basics of sniping like key-hole shots, manipulating angles, and the importance of cover and concealment. Hezbollah took it one step further when they designed and released their own video game in the summer of 2007 entitled Special Forces II. This computer game, selling for only $10 in the dusty markets of Hezbollah-controlled Lebanon, offered exciting battle scenes with professional, high-quality graphics. In the game, Hezbollah children (and adults) could aim at virtual Israeli soldiers with their sniper rifles and blow away their Zionist enemy on the safety of their computer screen. With Special Forces II, Hezbollah ingeniously found a way to integrate political indoctrination and battlefield training to gain revenue for the movement.

A guerrilla sniper does not need to buy a video game and download it on their computer to learn how to snipe in the cyber world. The interested gamer can enter any number of on-line internet service providers (ISPs) that organize real-time computer wars between competing teams. Today, a person can log onto a *Red Orchestra* ISP and fight among the ruins of Stalingrad as either a German or Russian sniper. Urban sniping is just a click away.

The advantage of using open sources to train is they are legal, dual purpose information. A guerrilla watching Antonio Banderas’ sniper techniques in *Assassins* can claim they are merely relaxing on a Friday night – not training for combat. A guerrilla playing *Call of Duty* is not learning to take a long distance head shot – they are just playing a kid’s game to pass the time. And a guerrilla reading about the assassination of JFK is just a history buff. Are security forces going to arrest and imprison someone for reading history?

Online Training Manuals

As part of a guerrilla organization’s training efforts, a guerrilla movement may publish their own training manuals to professionalize the movement. The IRA produced their now infamous *Green Book*, Brazilian guerrilla Carlos Marighella published his *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* and it makes sense guerrillas committed to better sniping would produce their own sniper training manuals. In May 2005, this is exactly what an Iraqi insurgent group did, publishing an on-line sniper training manual. Importantly, this publication revealed a level of professionalism rarely attained by a guerrilla organization and shows how difficult it is to stop sniper training if the guerrilla movement is committed to it. What are security forces going to do with an on-line site…locate and shut down the website, just to have another one pop up a day later on a different address in a different country?

Safehouses

A common method of clandestine training is through one-on-one instruction in safehouses. In a safehouse, a sniper instructor can train several students at a time on the basics of the trade using lectures, dry erase boards, and videos. Students can practice the fundamentals of marksmanship without firing a single shot. In any safehouse the students can put these fundamentals to the test with pellet guns, which are quiet, do not penetrate the surrounding walls, and allow the student to begin bridging the gap between theory and reality.

Bosnian soldiers trapped in Sarajevo learned to become snipers in part from foreign instructors who volunteered to come in and teach them. Because the Bosnian government did not want UN forces or potential Serbian collaborators to know about the training, the sessions were held in secret at local safehouses. The sniper students took advantage of private buildings with large, sturdy basements so they could actually shoot their rifles in homemade, indoor shooting ranges, all within close proximity to the populace. Even though the Serbians had the city surrounded and bombarded the Sarajevans daily, they did not stop the defenders from developing and training their own snipers in secret using a system of urban safehouses.

Is this Airsoft player training
for urban warfare?

Public & Underground Ranges

Why should the guerrilla sniper student try to hide when they can train in plain sight in any number of civilian sniper schools? It is easy to attend one of a thousand marksmanship or sniper courses offered somewhere in the world. Beyond signing up for and attending recognized shooting courses, the guerrilla sniper can join a shooting club or go to a civilian rifle range to tune their skills in an open, legal manner. Think of the basic combat tactics to be learned at a hunting club: as the guerrilla shoots birds, hunts deer, and stalks wild boar, they are also maintaining their wartime skills.

If the guerrilla organization has trouble finding a suitable range or club, they can create their own with a little money and a piece of open land or a warehouse. The guerrilla organization then forms their own gun or hunting club to train their members under the guise of a legitimate business. Honest civilians are encouraged to join these clubs to give the club a better cover, but guerrilla snipers go there and train free of charge. This is essentially what the French gun clubs in the late 1800s did. They provided a core of trained guerrilla snipers (Francs-Tireurs) to fight the neighboring Prussians' inevitable invasions. True, the French gun enthusiasts openly practiced the art of target shooting when their country was at peace. But when their homeland was invaded, they used these same skills to pick off and harass the Prussians as they marched westward towards Paris. Although the Prussians surrounded, starved, and sacked the French capital in 1870-1871, they never solved the problem of the guerrilla marksmen who were the product of local civilian gun clubs.

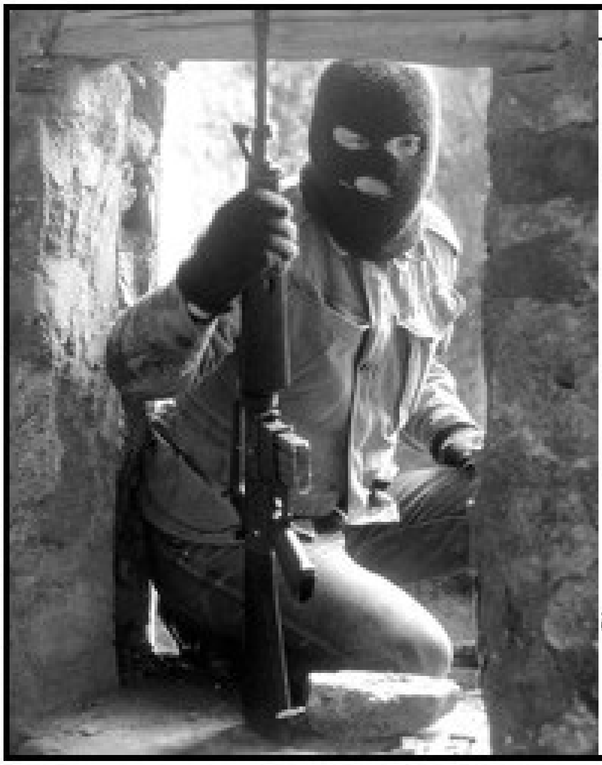
A different solution for live-fire shooting practice is going underground in sewer systems or basements. Shooting underground is a good idea because the surrounding earth absorbs the noise of the gunfire. Also, when underground, there is no chance of random security patrols or civilians coming by and stumbling upon the training. Essentially, the guerrilla organization creates their own range, mimicking the methods legitimate in-door ranges use to muffle the sound of gunfire. These ideas are not new as the IRA used underground rifle ranges to hide their training and Iraqi insurgents used mattresses to absorb the sounds of their shooting. Guerrilla movements of all shades and stripes have taken advantage of the underworld to provide a secure living/training/travel space like the Warsaw Ghetto Jews in 1943, the Polish Underground during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, and the Chechen guerrillas when defending Grozny in the 1990s.

Suppressed Weapons

The suppressor is an invaluable training tool for the guerrilla sniper because it enables them to train covertly. Since the biggest problem with target shooting in a secure manner is the sound of gunshots, suppressors alleviate this problem. If the guerrilla is shooting underground, in a basement, or in a remote area just outside of town, suppressors allow the sniper to train without fear of discovery due to the sound of gunfire that can normally be heard for a mile in all directions.

Guerrilla Safehavens

The urban guerrilla can solve most of the problems associated with hiding from enemy security forces and civilian informants if they can secure an urban safe haven. For example, when Iraqi insurgents took control of Fallujah from April to November 2004, they secured one giant urban training facility. The insurgents were free to train when and where they wanted to. As long as the guerrillas took security precautions from aerial surveillance, they could run ranges and conduct practical shooting exercises anywhere in the city. More importantly, insurgent snipers could use their control of the city to combine their unhindered urban sniping training with preparation for future coalition attacks. This allowed an integration of sniping theory, training, and actual execution.



The IRA had difficulties training in many areas of Northern Ireland because of the significant British military and law enforcement presence. Also, the dense urban area of Belfast made weapons training challenging so members could only receive hands on familiarization training there. IRA members had more freedom to train in the rural and isolated areas in South Armagh and across the border in the Republic of Ireland.

Out of Country Training

If the guerrilla organization cannot train in their own country because enemy security forces are just too oppressive, they may have to leave the country and get training elsewhere. If an Iraq guerrilla cannot train in Baghdad, they can go to Syria, Lebanon, or Iran and get in-depth training unmolested by American forces. If an IRA sniper was under constant watch in Northern Ireland, he could slip across the border into the Republic of Ireland and train there. A Chechen sniper-trainee may be harassed and harried in their own country, but there are plenty of places in neighboring Georgia, Dagestan, and Ingushetia where they can train at their leisure. For years, Afghanistan embodied the idea of a distant guerrilla training university, churning out future snipers, car bombers, and assassins.

On the other hand, if a group cannot leave the country for whatever reason, they can bring in an outside expert to assist them. This importation is common in guerrilla circles since IRA members are known to train the FARC guerrillas in Columbia, Hezbollah is known to train the PLO, Iran trains Iraqi Shiite insurgents, and American forces have already encountered Chechen snipers in Fallujah and Najaf.

Advanced Training

Depending on the government’s population control measures, advanced sniper training may be conducted right under the noses of enemy security forces with relative ease and little risk. For example, sniper teams can plan dry runs of future attacks by blending into the population and conducting rehearsals by walking through their actual plan. Observation and security teams can walk to where they would set up their positions and have a cup of coffee and talk to a friend. The actual sniper can walk to where they would take their shot and instead of having a rifle with them, they can carry a camera and take a picture from where they would shoot. For the dry run, pressing the shutter of the camera is equivalent to pulling the trigger of the rifle. The sniper teams that shot President Kennedy conducted this exact kind of pre-operation walk through which allowed them to successfully plan their ambush.

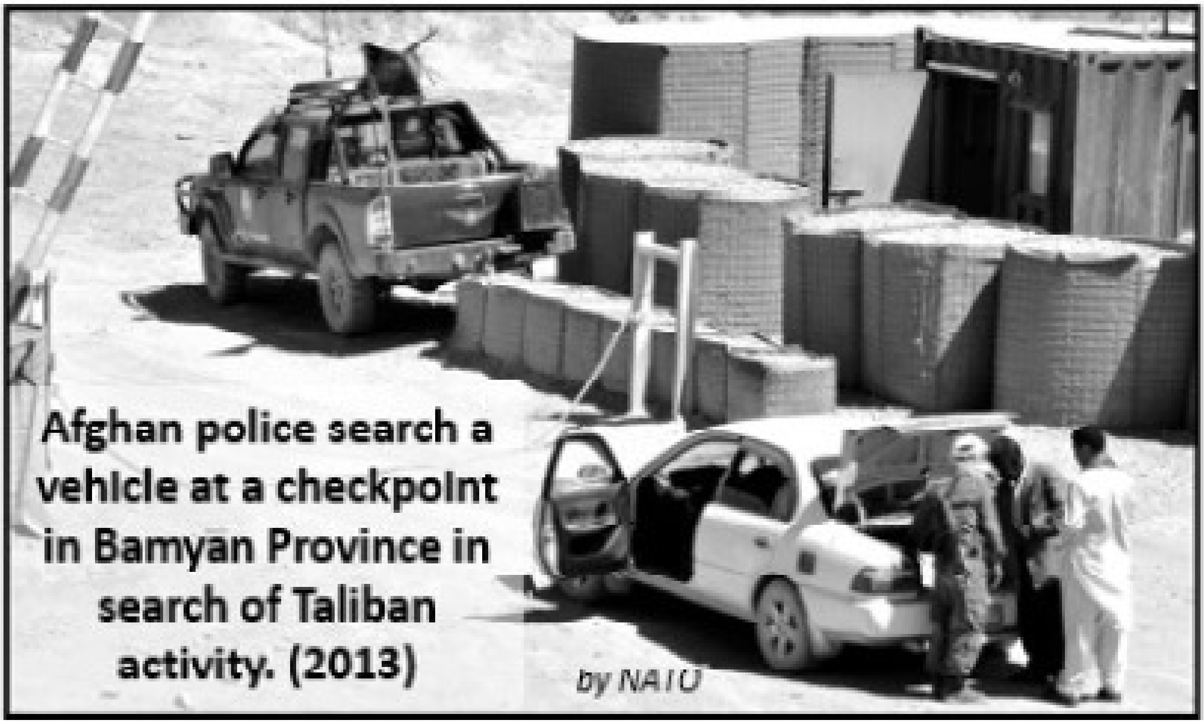
Training urban guerrilla snipers is not an easy task since they are members of an illegal, clandestine movement. The guerrilla organization does not enjoy the open training of conventional military forces. They are burdened with training their members in a secure manner, hidden from omnipresent security forces. However, just as the guerrilla conducts combat operations in an unconventional manner to succeed, so must they conduct their training. The guerrilla movements in Northern Ireland, Iraq, Palestine, and Chechnya show us that urban guerrilla sniping skills can be taught in a clandestine, secure manner even while under constant pressure from enemy security forces.

Transporting the Weapon

Once the guerrilla sniper has trained with their weapon in a secure manner, they must transport their weapon to wherever they intend to conduct their sniper attack. Moving their weapon may be easy or difficult, depending on the environment they are operating in and the characteristics of their weapon system. Charles Whitman drove onto the University of Texas (Austin) campus in his car. He then walked calmly, pushing a dolly with a footlocker on it, to the Texas Tower, and took an elevator to the top floor. Hidden inside the footlocker were the various weapons he would use to kill a dozen-plus people. Because Whitman looked like everyone else (he was wearing coveralls, like a janitor would), acted completely normal, and had his guns hidden in a wooden box, he appeared non-threatening to both security guards and students. Since he blended in with the environment, Whitman was able to move in the open, without suspicion, to his shooting platform - the Texas Tower.

In the cities, where cars are allowed to move freely about, any vehicle – a van, a pick-up truck, a car – is a means of concealment for both the shooter and their weapon. If civilian automobiles are allowed to travel freely in a war zone (like Baghdad or Belfast) then the guerrilla sniper can take advantage of this freedom of movement to travel, undetected, by car.

If a car is not an option and moving or carrying a large object, like a footlocker, is too suspicious, then the guerrilla sniper might have to conceal their weapon on their person. Again, we see why guerrilla snipers often choose concealable weapons. A guerrilla sniper wearing civilian clothes, walking down the street with a Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifle over their shoulder will not make it very far. However, a guerrilla sniper with a broken-down, short-barreled carbine concealed under their jacket can walk among the people, even by security forces, and raise no suspicion.



Afghan police search a vehicle at a checkpoint in Bamyan Province in search of Taliban activity. (2013)

by NAIU

It is important to note a guerrilla sniper does not necessarily have to hide their movement to their place of attack, but they do have to conceal their weapon system. In fact, the guerrilla sniper is prepared to move among the people, and to be observed by security forces, but to do so in a manner that raises no suspicion. Even during combat operations, while being fired upon by the enemy, the guerrilla sniper conceals their weapon. They do this because the sniper understands enemy security forces operate under certain rules of engagement and it is illegal for them to shoot unarmed civilians. However, if these security forces see someone in civilian clothes holding a rifle in their hands, they are dead. If these same security forces see someone with no visible weapon, even if they suspect the person is an enemy combatant, they will most likely not shoot or at least delay their shot until they can get more information. Either way, the guerrilla buys a little more time.

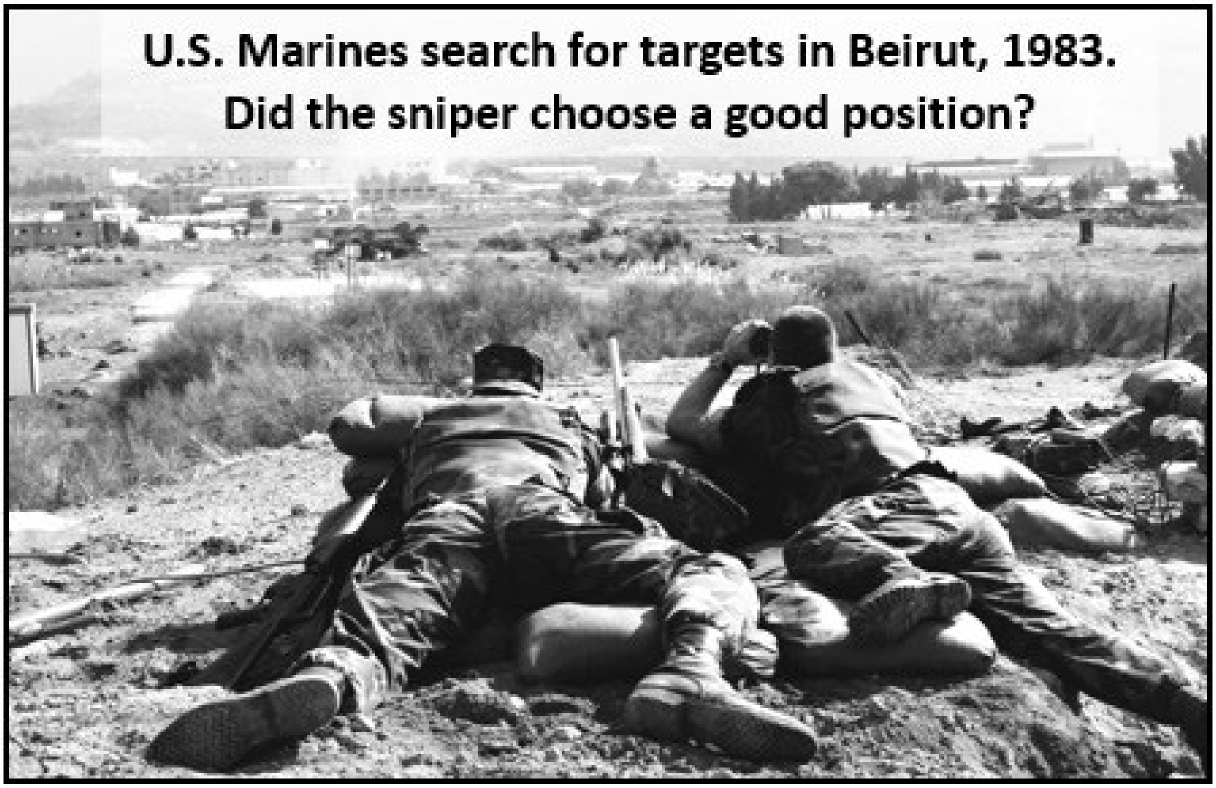
Depending on the situation, a guerrilla sniper may choose not to conceal their weapon and may choose not to be in civilian clothes. In this manner, the guerrilla sniper chooses to operate in a completely legal manner in accordance with the laws of land warfare. However, the guerrilla organization can still take measures to ensure their security and ensure they are not detected as they move to their sniper platform. In Northern Ireland, Chechnya, and Lebanon, guerrilla forces employed a series of lookouts to help move their snipers into position. With this method, the guerrilla organization established a series of surveillance positions, all the way to the target area, to look for the enemy and warn the sniper of any threats. If the lookouts, who might be anyone from school children to taxi drivers, saw anything suspicious, they made a call and the attack was called off. If the lookouts gave the “all clear”, the sniper could move safely to their target.

Another successful method to get the weapon and the shooter safely to the target area is to move them separately. For example, if a Christian sniper in Beirut wanted to shoot at Hezbollah militiamen from a certain building, they could do so discretely. The Christian sniper’s group could move the weapon to the building at night, several days before the actual attack, and hide the rifle inside the building. Then, the sniper could move to the building, weapons-free, in case they were searched at a checkpoint, and enter the building without any incriminating evidence on their person. Then, the sniper would recover the weapon, make the shot, put the weapon back in its hiding place, and leave the building, evidence-free.

Choosing a Shooting Platform

The guerrilla sniper chooses their platform based on what their target is and where it is. In most circumstances, the guerrilla sniper knows the specific characteristics of their target beforehand because security forces wear a uniform (so they are easily identified as a target) and they are predictable while manning their vehicle checkpoints, outposts, guard towers, and observation points, and conduct their regular security patrols.

Consequently, when a guerrilla sniper targets a static vehicle checkpoint, they had ample time to study their target, like a homework project. Some snipers spend days, weeks, or even months studying a particular checkpoint. Over the course of time the sniper studies the checkpoint’s habits, patterns, security measures, level of alertness, rotation schedule, and the like. After the sniper identifies the checkpoint’s weaknesses, they construct a plan to exploit these weaknesses. The sniper’s plan takes into consideration the range of their weapon system and the shooter’s own ability. There may be a great shooting platform located 500 meters away from a target, but the sniper, firing an AK-47, may only be able to hit their target at 300 meters. The sniper then selects the best shooting platform within this 300 meter radius from the target.


U.S. Marines search for targets in Beirut, 1983.
Did the sniper choose a good position?

Once they are within their range, several more elements are weighed. One consideration is the need to maintain anonymity. If the shooter fires from an abandoned or unoccupied building (a favorite tactic of Chechen snipers in Grozny), they will be alone when they make their shot. Or, if the shooter can fire from a public facility, like a parking garage, then security forces will be unable to connect the firing platform to the shooter, since the government or a private company owns the parking garage. No matter what choice the shooter makes, they strive to achieve relative isolation when they make their shot. This means when the shooter pulls the trigger, they are isolated from any potential eyewitnesses. A shooter can achieve this isolation by firing, for example, from an apartment. There may be people all around the sniper in adjacent apartments, but as long as no one is physically with the sniper when they make their shot, they are anonymous.

The shooter also takes into consideration any urban obstacles near the target. If the sniper places an obstacle between them and their target, then the target will have a difficult time reacting effectively, thus aiding the sniper’s escape. For instance, the Miljacka River runs east to west, down the center of Sarajevo, dividing the city into southern and northern halves. From the southern side of the city, Serbian Bosnian snipers fired across the river at Sarajevo’s civilians, the Bosnian armed forces, and the UN’s own troops, with little fear of retribution. While Sarajevo is just one example, any large city has a multitude of obstacles, like bridges, overpasses, elevated highways, and rows of buildings, that can be used as a physical barrier to prevent government security forces from getting to the sniper.

The sniper can make the security forces’ job difficult, or even impossible, if they use “position overload” and “split the seams” when choosing a shooting platform. What is meant by position overload is the sniper intentionally fires from an area with many potential firing positions. So, firing from the top of a mosque tower, is not a good spot, because it is an obvious location with few actual firing positions. However, firing from a massive building, like the Holiday Inn Beirut, offers positional overload. Because, in the Holiday Inn, there are hundreds of individual loopholes and sniper ports from which a sniper could shoot from and reacting security forces will be unable to narrow down the exact location quickly, if at all.

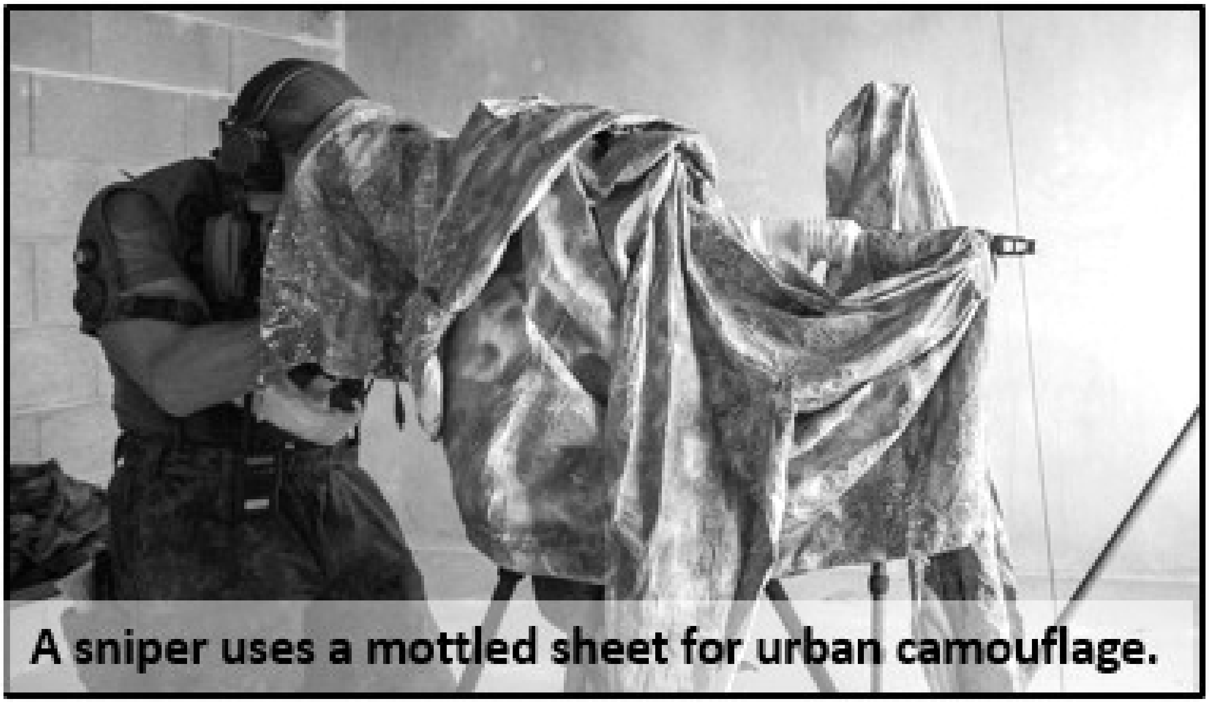
Splitting the seams means a sniper fires from a position where security forces are unable to backtrack the sniper’s firing azimuth. In order to split the seams, the sniper chooses a location, like a building that is adjacent to, or in line with, another building. This technique works best when a sniper fires at angle, down a parallel street, towards a target. Since the street is lined with block after block of buildings and cars, it is hard to backtrack the shot to a specific location because a miscalculation of only a degree or two will send security forces to the wrong building, or even the wrong city block, depending on how faulty their calculations were. (This subject will be discussed more in subsequent chapters on counter-sniper techniques and sniper forensics.)

Urban Camouflage

Once the sniper chooses a suitable sniper platform, they camouflage themselves so they are invisible to their target and nearby civilians. However, the urban camouflage required to be successful is drastically different than that used in a rural setting. For the urban sniper, camouflaging oneself in an urban hide site is much easier than camouflaging oneself in the woods, which can take hours of painstaking preparation to get the right look.

Depending on the structure a sniper is in, excellent camouflage may be already available. For instance, one can simply draw the curtains of a window close to be effectively concealed from outside eyes. Or the windows may already be tinted or have reflecting material on the surface so the people inside the room are invisible to anyone looking in. The sniper can also use common furniture found in a building to construct a concealed position within a room - a hide site within a hide site. An overturned desk, couch, or bed makes for excellent visual screening when positioned properly inside a room. If furniture, curtains, and windows are unavailable (like in the bombed out ruins of Grozny) then other methods can be used. One thing the sniper can do is paint the room they will shoot from a different color so the shooter blends in with it. It would take two people, armed with paint cans and rollers, less than ten minutes to paint the interior of a room a more subdued color that matches the shooter’s clothing. Or the shooter can match their clothing with the room’s interior to get a better color blend.

Another technique is for the shooter to hang a fine mesh net along the room, in front of their position, so the room has a mesh wall concealing the shooter. Since the shooter is up close to the mesh, they can see and shoot through the mesh. However, people that are far away cannot see past the mesh - it looks like a solid wall. This technique works well if the room is dark or in the shadows, for the darkness enhances the deception, making the mesh look like the back wall of the room.



A sniper uses a mottled sheet for urban camouflage.

Perhaps the easiest, and by far the most effective means of camouflage, is the use of a sniper shroud. With this method, the sniper takes a bed sheet or blanket that matches the color of the room they will shoot from (this method works the same inside a vehicle, as well). Usually, if the sniper has a light colored tan sheet or a dark gray sheet, they can cover most color/lighting scenarios. The sniper places the shroud over themselves and their weapon system so nothing is showing. Then, they make a small hole in the shroud for the scope, place matching color gauze over the scope itself to prevent reflections, and rubber band the shroud tightly to the scope. With this shroud, the sniper and their weapon are totally concealed. They are a shapeless, formless blob that blends in perfectly with their background. All it takes is a ten-dollar bed sheet and the shooter has achieved invisibility.

The Hide Site

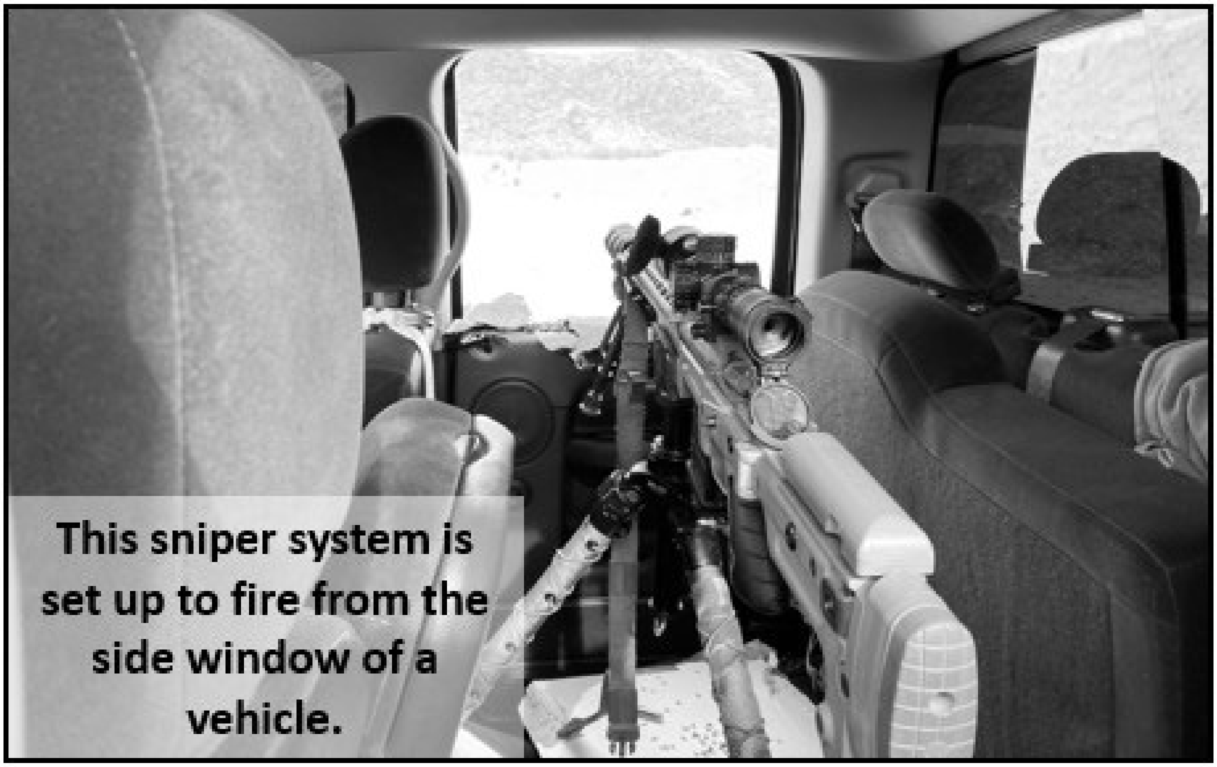
There are many considerations when configuring a hide site. If a sniper plans on staying in a hide site for extended periods of time or intends to use the hide site repeatedly, then they may have the luxury of preparing the place to meet their needs. First, the sniper must be able to enter and exit the hide site without being seen or announcing they have arrived. A common mistake is to use a door when entering a room, which momentarily changes the light in the room as the door opens and closes. If the sniper uses a door, they need to cover the entrance with blankets so when they enter and exit through it, there are no light changes in the room.

Once in the hide site, the sniper must ensure the enemy cannot see any movement in the room whatsoever. One thing the sniper can do to hide their movement in the room is to hang mesh netting or sheets along the walls to create corridors the sniper moves through while in the room. Another good technique, used by snipers as far back as Stalingrad, is to brick up the window in a room so there is only a small port remaining that the sniper shoots out of. That way, the sniper can easily block off the small window opening and move freely throughout the room while remaining undetected. Or, instead of bricking up a window, a sniper can knock a small hole in the wall of a building so they have their own gun port to shoot from. This instant gun port method has been used all over, from Stalingrad to Sarajevo and Ireland to Israel.

If a sniper uses a building for their hide site, they probably do not need to be uncomfortable or cold. Lying in the prone position, as most conventional snipers are taught to fire from, is fatiguing. A person’s body is simply not designed to lay flat on their stomach, with their head raised up, for long periods of time. There is no reason why a sniper cannot sit comfortably in a chair as they observe the surrounding terrain through a small gun port or loophole. In fact, a good idea is to use the “executive position” for prolonged periods of time. With this method, the sniper sets up their position with a desk and a chair. They place their weapon on the desk, pointing toward their target, and sit in their chair, facing the desk, as if they were a businessman writing a memo. This relaxed position enables the sniper to observe an area for hours on end with their weapon at the ready to make a quick shot.

If a sniper must lie on the floor of a building due to tactical reasons, they should think of the materials present to make themselves more comfortable and to insulate themselves from the heat-sapping qualities of a cold stone or concrete floor. It might be useful to line the sniper’s position with a mattress, left-behind clothes, cushions from a couch, or blankets. The entire building should be thought of as a tool to help the sniper accomplish their mission.

An unconventional but effective means of acquiring a good hide site is through a home invasion, which was a popular method used by the IRA, by both sides in Israel, and by the Iraqi insurgents. The home invasion has the advantage of providing a sniper team with a good shooting platform, regardless if people are in the home or not, and regardless if they support the guerrillas or not. With this method, a sniper team selects a private residence that they want to use as a shooting platform. Then, a security team conducts a forced entry of the house and holds the family hostage. The sniper leaves the residence. Simple, right? Maybe not.



This sniper system is set up to fire from the side window of a vehicle.

This tactic has its challenges since it is only a short-term method, after all, how long can you hold a family hostage before someone knows there is something wrong…a few hours? Also, the family are potential eye-witnesses who will later be questioned by enemy security forces. Just think of all the challenges: the guerrillas must conceal their own identities, herd the family into an isolated room so they can be controlled, blindfold the hostages, keep them quiet, block their hearing, rotate them to the bathroom, deal with phone calls and unexpected visitors, and keep the hostages calm, all while creating an appearance of normalcy in the house until the operation is over.

As mentioned before, a sniper may prefer to use a vehicle as a shooting platform, which is, in fact, a mobile hide site. A vehicle, like a van, may be chosen for a hide site because it conveniently hides the shooter and their activities. However, a van is a suspicious vehicle by nature and a regular vehicle like a large four-door sedan or an SUV may be more appropriate since they raise less suspicion. Regardless of what vehicle the sniper chooses, something must be done to conceal the sniper's activities inside the vehicle. This can be done by applying tinting to the vehicle's windows (like the DC snipers did), putting up sunshades or curtains (like the Iraqi insurgents do), slapping on bumper stickers and signs, or even temporarily screening the sniper by holding up a newspaper or a road map.

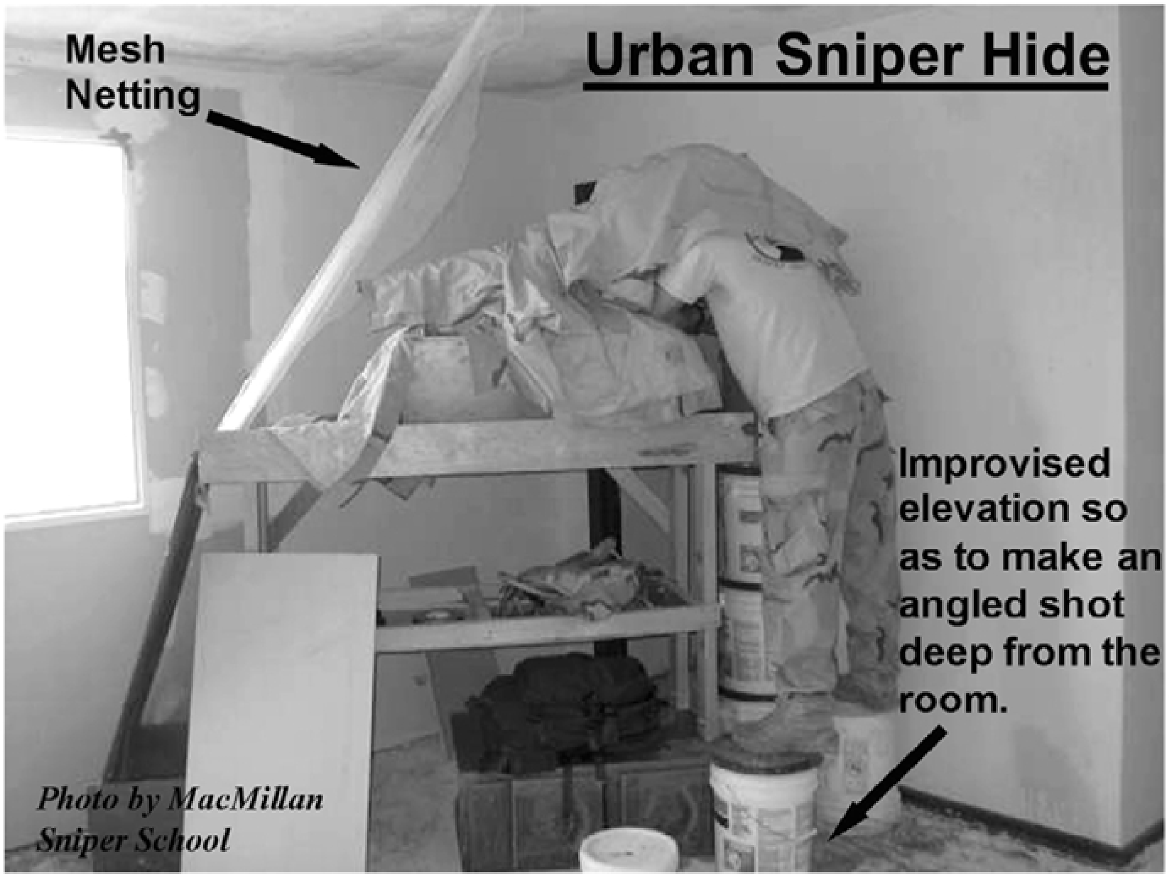
Experienced snipers will devise a method for shooting from the vehicle without raising eyebrows. This may be as simple as opening a tinted window a crack, sticking the barrel of a weapon out and firing a shot. The sniper could make a gun port in the car, just as with a building, by drilling a hole in a side door and then firing through this hole as they lay down in the back of the vehicle. The same thing could be done if the shooter fires from the trunk of a car. When firing from the back of a vehicle, the shooter can remove one of the rear taillights and shoot through it. Or the shooter can make a gun port behind the rear bumper, rig the bumper so they can lower it when they are in sight of their target, make a shot, and raise the bumper again to cover up the gun port (Iraqi insurgent snipers have used all of these techniques to modify their vehicles). With the help of a metal shop, a sniper can modify their vehicle by armoring it to withstand counterfire from opposing security forces. The IRA Goldfinger sniper crew did this where they installed an armored shield in the back of their Mazda hatchback.

Observation

Good observation is a fundamental skill for any successful sniper. This requirement is no different for the guerrilla sniper, except they go about in a covert manner. When one thinks of observation and sniping, we naturally think of a dedicated observer that works with the shooter. We also think of this observer sitting behind a high-powered spotting scope, surveying the terrain, looking for targets for the shooter to engage. The guerrilla sniper can use this method if they are in a hide site for a prolonged period of time, but extra precautions should be taken. To begin, the sniper should think of their spotting scope just as they would think of their weapon. They must conceal themselves and their scope just like their weapon.

The most intelligent method of long-term observation I found was conducted by the Bosnians' master counter-sniper in Sarajevo. This sniper established a series of observation ports in an apartment building by cutting holes in the concrete walls. He then placed his spotting scope into these ports so that he could observe the terrain. From a distance, since the spotting scope fit snugly into the hole, it did not look like there was a hole cut into the wall of the building at all. When the observation ports were not in use, he plugged the holes with foam balls, which had been painted black, to match the outside of the charred building. From these clandestine observation ports, the master sniper was able to secretly observe and record every aspect of the opposing Serbian lines until he knew every inch of the terrain.

But the sniper or spotter does not even have to be present to observe the terrain, not with today's technology. The guerrilla sniper can use an observation port, but instead of inserting a spotting scope, they insert a digital camcorder. The sniper sets up the camera in the morning, the camera records a certain area of terrain all day long, and then the sniper recovers the camera at night and downloads the recorded film. When the sniper gets home, they watch the film on their television, fast forward through periods of inactivity, and pause on a single frame and study any detail of the terrain which may give a clue about enemy activity.


Mesh Netting
Urban Sniper Hide
Improvised elevation so as to make an angled shot deep from the room.
Photo by MacMillan Sniper School

In this picture, a sniper student uses their uniform top to blend in with their background. Also, they have emplaced a mesh netting in front of them for visual screening and to hide their muzzle blast. This is excellent urban sniping technique.

With the advent of reliable, inexpensive, remote tilt-pan camera mounts a sniper can set up a camera system, hidden behind a mesh net or sniper shroud, and actually view the urban terrain – real time - from a remote location. The sniper can move the camera from left and right, up and down, and observe any specific area they want to, all while sitting several hundred meters away in a vehicle or a building. This tactic has the advantage of allowing the sniper to be completely safe, at a separate location from the camera, so that they are invulnerable to enemy observation teams or counterfire.

Technical means of observation, while entirely feasible, are expensive and have drawbacks (all machines break down eventually). There are other means of covert observation just as effective as remote video cameras but are easier to employ and with less risks. A tool for observation that should be in every sniper's collection is the periscope. With a periscope, a sniper (or observer) can look over a wall, around a car, or through a small hole cut in a building. The sniper periscope has been in use since at least World War I (a very valuable tool during the sniper war fought from competing trenches) and allows a sniper to observe the terrain without exposing themselves and getting shot for their troubles. Modern periscopes are lightweight, durable, reasonably priced, and available on the internet (like eBay).

Depending on the operational environment, the sniper may not have to sneak around to observe their enemy, they can do it in broad daylight. In Grozny, a Chechen sniper can peruse the local food markets, looking for the best deal on fresh vegetables as they size up a nearby Russian position. In the West Bank, a PLO sniper can sip tea at a Jerusalem cafe as they watch an IDF guard tower. As long as the guerrilla looks and acts like everyone else around them (and is free of incriminating physical evidence) they can go anywhere they please and openly case their next target.

If the sniper does not want to risk observing the target in person, they can have someone else conduct the surveillance for them. The IRA used 'dickers' – local school-age children - to watch British patrols and report on their activities so they could decide how to attack them. Hezbollah did the same thing in Lebanon where they set up 'neighborhood watch' groups that did nothing but look for and report on the Israeli occupation forces. Hezbollah snipers did not have to sit for hours watching an Israeli outpost, a local citizen did, who then fed this information to the guerrillas. The important point to make is a guerrilla organization (or sniper) can observe a target without using any mechanical or technical means of observation whatsoever and still be successful. They can do it all with brains and eyeballs.

Determining Distance

Determining distance is a key element of sniping because knowing the distance to a target is integral to accurate shooting. If a shooter does not know the correct distance to their target, they may undershoot or overshoot it. Over the years, many methods have been developed to estimate range, but today most conventional snipers use a laser rangefinder to determine the distance to the target. Although a laser rangefinder works in all environments, it is more appropriate in a rural environment where featureless terrain and long distances make range determination difficult. Laser rangefinders today are inexpensive and one can buy a good one, which is small and lightweight, for $150.00. Many manufacturers make scopes with integral laser rangefinders so the shooter does not have to carry extra equipment.

However, in an urban environment there is no need for a laser rangefinder. First, any laser rangefinder is an active device that emits a light source that can be detected by night vision devices. Plus, manufacturers make several different types of counter-sniper systems that can ‘see’ in the infrared spectrum, so using a laser emitting device is not a good idea from a security perspective. Second, the guerrilla usually does not have the luxury of carrying and concealing superfluous equipment, it only makes their job harder. And if a guerrilla were to use a scope with an integrated laser, that scope would be expensive (around $800, give or take), and would be easier to trace if captured, because they are relatively uncommon.

A sniper working the city of Bakhmut, UKR can calculate range based on known distances and landmarks.

Since a guerrilla knows the target they are going to attack and knows the location they plan to shoot from, they can walk from their target (like a checkpoint), then to their sniper platform, and calculate the distance by measuring their pace. Or the sniper can measure the distance on a bicycle or in a car.

Another method, which determines distance with pinpoint accuracy, is using a Global Positioning System (GPS). Instead of counting paces, the guerrilla uses their GPS when they are near the target (or parallel to the target, several blocks away), gets a pinpoint grid coordinate, then moves to the location they will shoot from, gets another pinpoint grid coordinate, and measures the distance between the two points. The shooter can get the exact distance, within a meter or two, every time.

The sniper can also use the natural characteristics of the city to aid in calculating distance. For instance, if a city block measures a hundred meters in length, then a target three blocks away is three hundred meters away. Additionally, a good city street map is more valuable to the urban sniper than the best laser rangefinder. A sniper can take a commercially produced, highly detailed street map and measure the distance between major landmarks, like intersections, bridges, monuments, and the like, and establish their own map with the distances written down between various points. This way, the sniper figures out where their target is on the map and then measure the distance to their shooting platform.

A variation of his technique is to use overhead satellite imagery, which can be found on Google Earth. All a sniper does is go online, download current, overhead imagery and uses the computer program to accurately measure distances between the target and the proposed shooting platform. As with using a GPS, the sniper can determine the exact distance within several meters. In fact, Iraqi insurgents have used commercially available satellite imagery to not only measure distances, but to show for propaganda purposes exactly where they have shot American soldiers.

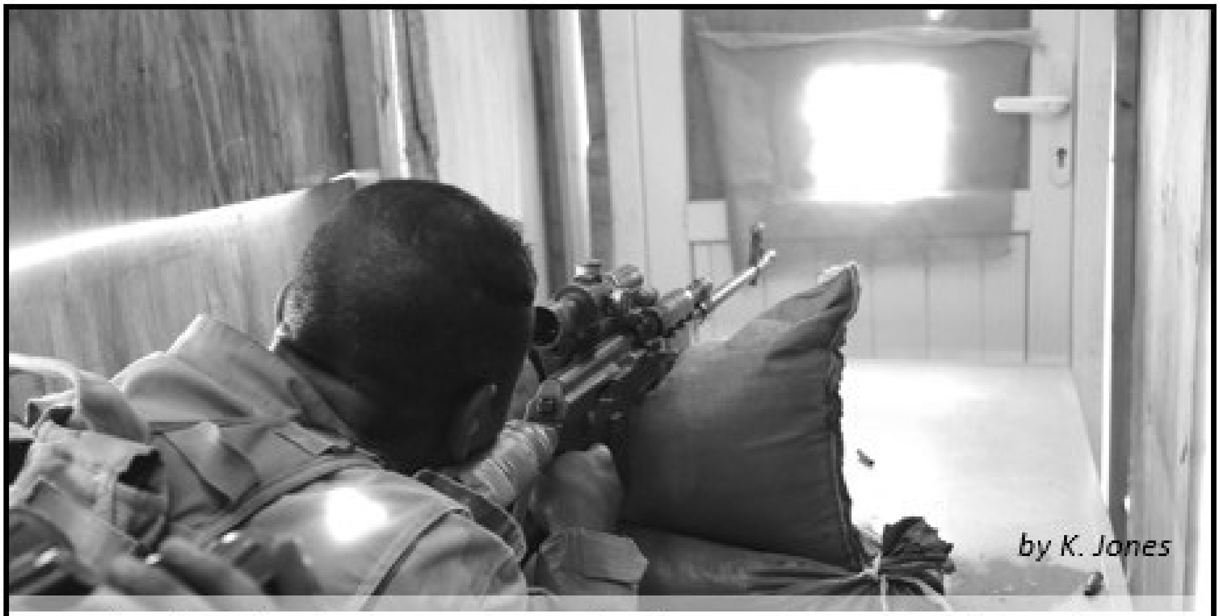
Hiding the Shot

A critical skill for the guerrilla sniper is the ability to successfully hide the muzzle flash, muzzle blast, and sound of the gunshot. Most snipers can move undetected to their shooting platform, lie in wait and remain invisible, and hit their intended target. Far fewer can successfully conceal their weapon’s visual and audio signature, even though this is the number one reason why snipers get killed.

The first issue we will discuss is muzzle flash, because the speed of light is much faster than the speed of sound and muzzle flash is the first signature that will be detected when a shot is fired. Let us define what ‘muzzle flash’ is. Muzzle flash is the visible flame caused by burning gunpowder exiting the barrel of a weapon after a shot is fired. Generally speaking, the larger the caliber of the weapon, the larger the muzzle flash.

Muzzle blast, which accompanies muzzle flash, is the disturbance caused at the muzzle when the rapidly burning gunpowder explodes out of the end of the barrel. This exploding gas disturbs any dirt, dust, or debris located near the weapon’s muzzle, raising a small cloud of matter. Even if the muzzle flash itself is not seen, the disturbed matter near the muzzle might be, giving away the sniper’s exact location. The most effective way to conceal this muzzle flash and prevent muzzle blast is to use a sound suppressor. The suppressor will eliminate almost all visible muzzle flash and reduce muzzle disturbance to almost nothing. However, since we will discuss the characteristics, limitations, and advantages of suppressors in the following chapter, we will discuss other means of concealing the muzzle flash and blast. This is certainly a valid exercise since, in many parts of the world, factory manufactured suppressors are hard to come by.

A simple way to hide the muzzle flash and blast is to fire the weapon from a loophole, for instance from a hole in a wall, so the wall itself blocks the flash and blast. A variation of this method is to take a keyhole shot. In other words, to fire from deep in a structure, where there is a restricted, enclosed, elongated opening so only the target, which is directly in front of the keyhole, can see the flash and blast. A perfect example of a keyhole shot is firing down a hallway, through an open door, and outside at the target. Unless a person is looking directly down the relatively narrow opening, no one will see where the shot came from.



by K. Jones

An Iraqi soldier makes a hallway shot - the interior structure will absorb most of the gunshot and flash. (2017)

Another way to eliminate muzzle blast (although it does nothing to stop muzzle flash) is to spread out a damp rag, about two feet by two feet in size, under the muzzle of the weapon so the cloth absorbs the muzzle blast and prevents dirt or debris from flying up after the shot. It’s even easier to pour water over the surface of whatever area a sniper is going to shoot from, to eliminate the dust cloud after the shot. If the shooter cannot wet down their area to prevent muzzle disturbance, they may want to fire from an upright position, away from the ground.

A shooter can reduce their muzzle flash by firing in daylight hours, or from a well-lit area to reduce an observer’s ability to distinguish the muzzle flash from surrounding light sources. However, firing a weapon without a suppressor at night, or from a darkened area, produces a huge light flash readily identified for what it is - a muzzle flash from a weapon. The sniper use a flash suppressor to reduce the incriminating flash, but all a flash suppressor (not to be confused with a sound suppressor) does is prevent the shooter from being blinded from the blast, while doing nothing to hide the flash to enemy observers.

The sniper can use other concealment methods like shooting through a medium that acts as a visual screen without affecting the performance of the bullet. For example, the sniper can shoot from behind fine mesh netting that no one can see through at a distance, but the sniper can see and shoot out of without affecting bullet trajectory. The sniper can also shoot through plastic, cardboard, or cloth, as long as it does not affect the bullet’s path.

If a sniper takes advantage of their optics, they can shoot from such a distance the target cannot see the muzzle flash and blast due to the limits of their eyesight. A sniper firing at a target from a thousand meters away from a concealed position can be sure their target cannot see the sniper even if they were looking directly at them. While any one of these improvised techniques may work, a sniper will most likely have to combine several of these techniques to conceal their muzzle flash and blast, depending on the situation and local conditions.

There are a few things, in regard to ammunition, the sniper should be aware of. To start, the sniper should never use tracer ammunition because it allows enemy forces to follow the tracer round back to the source. While this may sound like an obvious statement, there is an

Iraqi insurgent video that shows a sniper shooting at an American checkpoint with a tracer round. One can be sure this was meant to create a more impressive visual effect, but it also exposed their position, more than their muzzle flash or blast did. Another reason why we mention this is that some people put tracer rounds at the bottom of their magazine so they know they are running out of ammunition and that it is time to change their magazine. It would be a mistake to accidentally fire off a tracer round when one was trying to be stealthy.

Another consideration is the type of powder used with the ammunition being fired. Most modern ammunition uses smokeless powder so hardly any smoke from the burning gunpowder is visible after a shot is made. But, if a sniper hand -loads their own ammunition, or they use ammunition someone else hand-loaded, they need to make sure they are using smokeless powder.

The Gunshot

Without doubt, the most compromising element for the sniper is the noise of the gunshot, which gives away the firer’s location to the target and civilian bystanders. There are several methods to reduce this noise signature, but only one of them is truly effective. A sound suppressor, while it does an excellent job of hiding muzzle flash and muzzle blast, is purpose-built to reduce the noise signature of a weapon. A good sound suppressor reduces a gunshot to such a low level it is indistinguishable from the normal sounds of a busy city, like a car door shutting, and is not recognizable as a gunshot.

This VSS rifle has an integral suppressor firing sub-sonic ammunition reducing its sound greatly.

Other forms of sound suppression can be used such as shooting from a room lined with mattresses so when a rifle is fired within the room, the mattresses absorb the sound of the gunshot. This is what indoor rifle ranges do to absorb the sound of weapons being fired, except they use specially designed foam. This same sound absorption method can be used inside a vehicle. In this case, foam or mattresses are used to line the back of a vehicle so it becomes a mobile, silenced shooting range. Obviously, lining a room or building with padding to absorb sound takes a lot of preparation, creates a large signature, and remain as incriminating physical evidence after the attack.

If the sniper cannot use a sound dampening tactic, they can still use the inherent qualities of the city to confuse and deceive people listening for a gunshot by simply manipulating where and how they make their shot. One must first understand the hard, flat surfaces of a city, like walls and pavement, serve as sound deflectors and reflectors. When a gunshot is fired in the city, the sound waves hit and bounce off the surrounding surfaces. Consequently, it is difficult to determine exactly where a gunshot came from in a built-up area because of this echoing. To confuse their enemy, a sniper could fire a shot from the average city block, where there is a road down the middle and rows of buildings on either side. The sound of the gunshot will echo off the pavement and the surrounding buildings, and then bounce back and forth off each other, making the original source of the shot hard to determine.

Another way to hide the sniper's shot is to use cover noise. For instance, one group of guerrillas could open fire with a machine-gun from a location separate from the sniper. During the machine-gun burst, the sniper makes their shot (this was a common method used by both sides in Stalingrad). Or the sniper calls in artillery fire and makes their shot as the explosive shells burst on target. Whatever cover noise method that is used – exploding hand grenades, mortar fire, etc. – it only has to be sufficiently loud enough to disguise the noise of the gunshot.

If the sniper cannot cover their gunshot, they can at least confuse their enemy as to the source of the shot through multiple shots fired simultaneously. With this technique, the sniper coordinates with other sniper teams and fire together, on command. That way, multiple shots and gunshot echoes are heard at the same time. Enemy forces hearing these simultaneous, overlapping shots will not know how many shots were fired or where they came from. will discuss this assassination in depth in a subsequent chapter).

The Supersonic Crack

Hiding the sound of the gunshot does not eliminate the supersonic "crack" the bullet makes as it breaks the sound barrier speeding towards its target. The supersonic crack is not as compromising as the gunshot itself, but it does indicate a shot was fired. Depending on how far one is away from the bullet, they will hear the crack before they hear the gunshot. This is because the bullet is traveling faster than the speed of sound. Once, when I was about 500 meters away from a sniper, I heard the supersonic crack first as the bullet zipped over my head and then heard the gunshot a second later.

One solution to the supersonic crack is to use sub-sonic ammunition which does not break the sound barrier. However, this creates its own problems since subsonic ammunition has a reduced velocity, has a decreased range, and lacks penetration power. The combination of a sound suppressor and subsonic ammunition makes an excellent team but is best used for relatively close shots where a high-degree of bullet penetration is not required.

Another option to deal with the supersonic crack is to create cover noise such as revving the engine of a motorcycle, playing loud music, honking car horns, or creating a distraction with gunfire from a different location so the crack is not heard. Even if the supersonic crack is not completely masked, as long as it is distorted enough by the other noise so it is not distinguishable as the crack of a bullet, that is good enough.

Post Shooting Activities

Life can get difficult for the guerrilla sniper after they make their shot. First, civilian bystanders may report the shooting to the police. Consequently, the best thing a sniper can do is immediately disassociate themselves from the scene of the shooting. In layman’s terms, they need to make a fast getaway. This need for immediate physical disassociation from the scene of the shooting is exactly the reason why more sophisticated urban guerrilla snipers have evolved into using a car as a shooting platform.

Imagine if an IRA sniper, hidden in a 500 series BMW, fires at a British soldier in an armored car. Even if the soldier sees the sniper drive off in the BMW, what are they going to do, give chase? The BMW can go 120 mph, but the armored car is lucky to do 60 mph. This is an example of what some would call “asymmetric warfare”, where the guerrillas mix their unconventional tactics with the government’s own predictable ones, enabling the guerrillas to have the edge, even though they are outgunned. The armored car could blow up the BMW, but it certainly cannot catch it.

If high-speed chases are not the sniper’s style, they can use a ruse to escape, like dressing up as a government soldier or police officer. This mimicking allows the guerrilla to make a concealed shot from a building and then walk outside as if they are looking for the culprit. On a variation of this, the guerrillas could have a team dressed up as police “capture” the sniper, drive off in a police car with the sirens wailing, and then drop the shooter off at a safehouse. These types of false-flag operations have been used successfully by many guerrilla organizations, from the French resistance in World War II, dressing up like Germans, to the Iraqi insurgents, dressing up like American soldiers.

Perhaps, if the sniper selected a good hide site like a tall apartment building with hundreds of individual units, escape may be simple. The sniper makes their shot undetected, stashes their weapon in a secure hiding spot, takes the elevator to the street, and calmly walks away. Later, when the coast is clear, the sniper goes back to the apartment and resumes their normal life. Or, if security forces search the apartment and find the weapon, the sniper disappears and never comes back. In this case, the weapon is a throw away and the sniper is prepared to lose it during the course of the operation.

Here is another option. The sniper takes a shot from an apartment building, or a car, and immediately hands the weapon off to another guerrilla, whose sole job is to remove, transport, and hide the weapon. This way the shooter and the incriminating weapon are immediately separated from each other. Then, the shooter stays in place, sips a cold drink, or watches the news. When security forces arrive and ask the shooter if they saw anything, they shrug their shoulders, “I dunno.”

And if the security forces test the shooter for gunshot residue or put a dog on them, they have an answer for that too. “Oh, I was painting earlier today, that’s why you’re getting a false positive with your residue kits. You know, don’t you, common house paint has all the same ingredients as gunshot residue?” Or the shooter has some creosote on their boots from working in a wood shop. Dogs can be tricked just like residue kits can be tricked, and the IRA used all of the above in their counter-forensics war against the British.

This overt sniping team has an easy job – make the shot without getting killed. But what do they know about counter-forensics?

As always, after the shooting, the sniper has to take counter-forensics measures, of varying degrees, depending on the forensic threat they are facing. As soon as the guerrilla takes their shot, they are thinking of many things: where did the ejected cartridge go, are the security forces going to be able to recover the bullet intact, did anyone see the muzzle flash, do I have enough time to wipe off the gunshot residue now or do I do it later, do I stash the weapon or hide it on me, how is my alibi, will my cover story work, can I beat the security cordon or will I get stuck inside it, and if I mimic “normal” behavior and wear a ball cap, can I beat the public surveillance cameras?

In no way does this chapter covers all aspects of sniping tradecraft. It was intended to raise some of the salient elements a guerrilla sniper has to be mindful of – many which are different than what a conventional sniper thinks about - if they want to survive. In most cases, good urban sniping is good urban sniping, regardless of if it is a guerrilla or conventional sniper who is taking the shot.

Chapter 6

The Sound of Silence

How a Suppressor Works

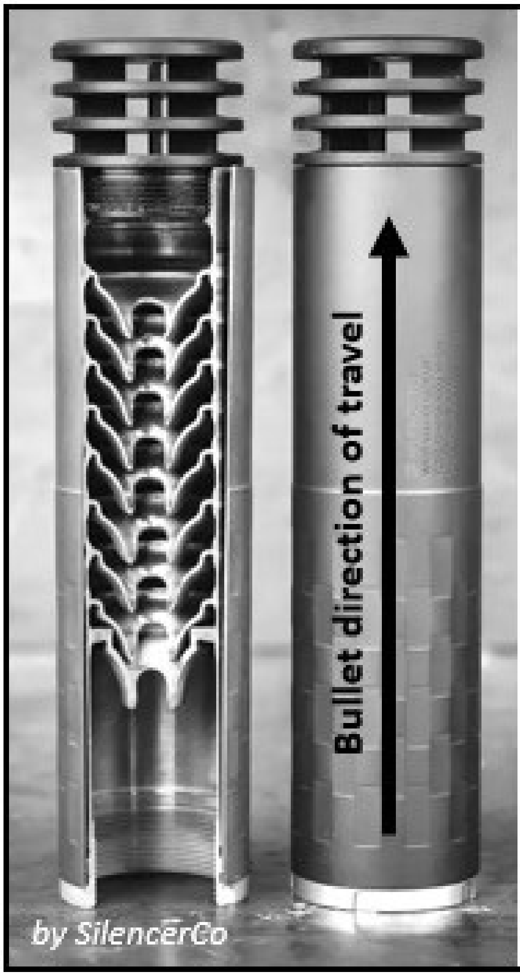
The tactical employment of sound suppressors, also known as "silencers"' or simply "cans", is really an extension of the chapter on snipercraft. However, the subject is so important, and sufficiently technical, it deserves its own dedicated space. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for the urban sniper, and even more so for the guerrilla sniper, to hide their muzzle flash, muzzle blast, and gunshot in combat. And there is nothing more effective at hiding all three of these potentially devastating signatures than the sound suppressor.

Suppressors were originally called "silencers"', but since they do not silence a weapon (they only quiet the weapon), the term "suppressor" is more accurate. A suppressor is simple and has not changed much since American designer-genius Hiram Maxim started producing and selling the first commercially successful suppressors in the early 1900s. A suppressor is simply a muffler designed to trap the exploding gases after a gun is fired. When a cartridge is fired in a gun, a firing pin hits the primer, the primer explodes, setting off the more powerful gunpowder, which in turn explodes. Since expanding gases take the path of least resistance, the exploding gun powder rushes towards the opening of the barrel (the muzzle) as it pushes the bullet ahead of it. Once the rapidly expanding gases push the bullet out of the gun and exit the restricted confines of the barrel, they explode with great force and noise into the relatively unrestricted air.

What a muzzle mounted suppressor does is trap this rapidly expanding gas into a series of baffles, which creates turbulence and redirects the gas back against itself, thus slowing, cooling, and dissipating the gas. An integral suppressor is different in that it has a series of ports that gradually bleed off the expanding gas as it moves out towards the muzzle. So, by the time the bullet actually exits the barrel, so much gas has already been bled off there is no final explosion to contain. Fundamentally, both types of suppressors slow the expanding gases to muffle the explosion.

Manufacturers constantly try to create new suppressors with more efficient designs. In general terms, the larger a suppressor, the quieter it is. However, since weight and concealability are always a concern, manufacturers must balance noise reduction ability with the size of the can. Currently, a shooter should expect a quality detachable can to weigh around 16 ounces and give anywhere from 30 to 40 dB (decibels) of noise reduction.

The caliber of the weapon being fired and the size of the cartridge are important when it comes to noise reduction because the bigger the cartridge, the louder the noise. Rifles like those chambered for .22LR are inherently quiet because the .22LR cartridge has a relatively small round and powder charge and therefore has a correspondingly reduced gunshot when the expanding gases exit the muzzle. Thus, small-bore rifles are easier to suppress than large-bore weapons, like a .50 caliber rifle, which has a huge round and a large powder charge.



Here we see an exploded view of a SilencerCo Omega 300 suppressor, showing the typical can design with internal baffles. As the bullet travels through the gun barrel, the exploding gases pushing it from behind exit the rifle and enter the baffles of the suppressor. The suppressor redirects and cools the gases, reducing the sound of the gunshot. The baffles are made of a cobalt, chromium, tungsten alloy (for heat resistance) while the tube is titanium. The can weighs just 12.6 ounces, is 7 inches long, and maintains 5.56 mm NATO rounds at 130 dB for about a 35 dB noise reduction. MSRP is $699.00.

Wet and Dry Suppressors

All suppressors are dry suppressors, meaning they are fired as is with no liquid additions to the interior of the device. While dry cans are the norm, many suppressors are also capable of firing “wet.” To make a can wet, all one has to do is pour a small amount of water into the suppressor, turn the can slowly to distribute the water inside the device, and then pour the excess water out. The water in the suppressor will help cool the expanding gases, thus making the gunshot quieter. This dampening effect from the water only lasts for about half a dozen rounds until the heat from the expanding gases causes the water to evaporate, then the can is dry and slightly louder again. Although water is the most common additive, other liquids like urine, engine coolant, and IV fluids like Ringer’s Lactate and Normal Saline will also work. Some suppressor manufacturers advise that their cans to be only run dry because the addition of a liquid increases internal pressure and may damage the device.

Even though there are many different liquids (often called ablative materials) that can be put in a can if the situation demands it, the shooter should be careful not to put anything corrosive or flammable inside. Inland Manufacturing makes their proprietary dB Foam for suppressors which also performs as a lubricant to prevent rusting and corrosion. Inland's dB foam reduces the first shot by up to 10 dB and then up to 3-5 dB reduction for up to ten shots fired. Some suppressors can be used with special grease, which is longer lasting than water because it will not evaporate. Some gun oils and lubricants can also be used, but they are not usually recommended because when the can gets super-hot, the oil can smoke or even catch fire.

The Supersonic Crack

As mentioned in the previous chapter, when a bullet has such a high velocity it breaks the sound barrier, people can hear a "crack" as the speeding bullet whizzes by. Contrary to popular myth, a detachable sound suppressor does not reduce the velocity of a bullet below the sound barrier, in fact, depending on the suppressor model, a can may actually increase bullet velocity. As we know, there are weapons with integral sound suppressors that bleed off the expanding gases as the bullet travels down the barrel towards the muzzle. Some weapons, like the MP5SD, do bleed enough of the gases off so that they reduce bullet velocity to the point where the round is no longer supersonic. In this case, the integral suppressor reduces both the muzzle noise and the supersonic crack.

Suppressor Maintenance

A suppressor is a mechanical device made out of lightweight stainless steel an aircraft-grade aluminum alloys. As a mechanical device, all suppressors require maintenance and are prone to eventual failure. Over time, the constant super-heating and cooling of the metal suppressor, combined with the corrosive property of the weapon's gases, will erode the suppressor's effectiveness. Suppressor life depends on how well it is maintained and on the inherent quality of the can. Some suppressors may outlast the life of the gun barrel as Surefire claims their cans have a service life of up to 30,000 rounds.

Recommended suppressor maintenance depends on the manufacturer. Gemtech recommends that the user conduct suppressor maintenance every 600 rounds. This includes removing the muzzle adapter and the end cap using a heavy carbon remover to remove any carbon or copper residue from inside both ends. Every 1,200 rounds or once a year armorer level maintenance should be conducted consisting of the removal of both ends and soaking the entire suppressor in a heavy carbon remover for an hour. This annual cleaning also includes disassembly and cleaning of their muzzle adapter component parts. No other maintenance is required by the shooter. Any other issues requires the suppressor being set back to the manufacturer repairs.

A final word on suppressor maintenance is to ensure the suppressor is aligned properly to the weapon. Once aligned properly and securely, the shooter should check the suppressor regularly to make sure it is in the proper position. If the suppressor is not perfectly aligned, an outgoing bullet can strike the suppressor, damaging the can and throwing off the bullet. Furthermore, even if a suppressor remains in proper alignment, the shooter should check the suppressor periodically after shooting. When a bullet leaves the barrel of a weapon it may yaw, meaning the bullet deviates from its intended rotational axis. I have seen a bullet, which was fired from a perfectly mounted suppressor, yaw upon exiting the barrel and clip the end of the suppressor, tearing off a small piece of the can. The suppressor had to be removed and sent back to the manufacturer for replacement.

Baghdad Embassy 2019
by K. Talbot

A U.S. Marine aims his M40A6 rifle with a Surefire FA762SS can.

The Superhot Suppressor

It only takes about 50 rounds of rapid fire to superheat a suppressor because it is made of such lightweight metals. I have burnt my hand on a suppressor, burnt through my pants, and melted the carpet in our rental car. Because this was soon after the GWOT, suppressors use wasn't the norm and the overall industry had minimal suppressor knowledge. After firing on the range, you had to let your rifle and can sit for about 45 minutes to cool down enough to handle. My solution was to wrap the hot can in an asbestos welder's glove that I bought at the hardware store before putting it away in the gun case.

Thankfully, the suppressor industry has evolved since then and there is recognition that superheated cans are a problem. In response, Knights Armament Corporation manufactures a suppressor shroud that goes over their cans to protect the user and the can from touching other objects in a superheated state. Many other companies produce suppressor covers made of Kevlar and Nomex material that wraps directly around the can to protect it while hot. These serve to protect the can from damage and improves shooter safety while operating in close quarters.

Historic Resistance to Suppressors

Even as far back as World War II, some professionals appreciated the capabilities of a sound suppressor. Colonel Mason-McFarlane, who was the British Military Attache in Berlin in the 1930s and lived within view of where Hitler observed the big parades in Berlin, wanted to kill Hitler using a suppressed weapon. By the spring of 1939, Mason-McFarlane correctly judged that Hitler intended to start a war and warned the British government to either kill Hitler now, or start a preemptive war, because with every passing month, the likelihood of either prospect dimmed. Mason-MacFarlane later related his plan: “In London…I had strongly urged that Hitler should be assassinated. My residence in Berlin was barely 100 yards from the saluting base of all the big Fuhrer reviews. All that was necessary was a good shot and a high-velocity rifle with telescopic sight and silencer. It could have been fired through my open bathroom window from a spot on the landing some 30 feet back from the window.”

True, Hitler could have been shot with a suppressed weapon as the loud sounds of marching soldiers, cheering crowds, and ceremonious bands would have provided so much covering noise that the shot would have been undetected. However, the subsequent dragnet conducted by Hitler’s SS bodyguards would have found the likely shooting platform and the Gestapo would have used their persuasive questioning techniques to get some answers. It would have been a suicide mission, but millions of lives would have been saved. The sniping plan was rejected by London and World War II erupted later that year.

Surprisingly, eighty-five years after Mason-MacFarlane’s plan, many in military and policing communities are ignorant of the capabilities and advantages of the sound suppressor. After the start of the GWOT, many professionals did not appreciate and thus did not use a suppressor even after multiple tours in combat. However, professional sniping thought has evolved since the early 2000s and the idea of using a suppressor is now generally accepted. Today, there is no excuse for modern military and police snipers not to use a suppressor. They are readily available by a score of professional manufacturers who turn out quiet, durable, lightweight suppressors for any weapon out there.

Why did so many people, despite being in the shooting profession, know virtually nothing about the characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages of using a suppressor? I think that the main reason was obvious - conventional tactics dominated the sniping space and this conventional mindset became a mental prison, confining security professionals to what they knew. Even career military sniper Mark Spicer wrote in his book about sniping: “The suppressed sniper rifle is a strange weapon and requires a lot of practice to master…” Simply put, most of the world expected when a gun is fired, flames belch out of the end of the barrel along with an ear-splitting explosion. Instead of solving this problem, the sniping world became used to the gunshot and adapted their tactics to deal with it instead of getting rid of the gunshot itself.

A Russian soldier poses with a SVCh sniper rifle with suppressor which is replacing the outdated SVD.

Because of this conventional mindset, I have heard officers, who were leading men in combat, scoff at the idea of using suppressors. They discounted suppressors as “something Special Forces might use” as opposed to thinking of suppressors as being an everyday tool that each soldier and sniper needs to succeed and survive in close urban combat. But I have also spoken to Special Operations soldiers, who were combat veterans, who also scoffed at the idea of using suppressors simply because they too were untrained in the tactical employment of suppressors.

Many in the civilian community with little knowledge or experience with suppressors only see them used in Jason Bourne movies and think of suppressors as an assassination tool. The logic follows, why would you need to use a suppressor unless you were going to assassinate someone? As a result, in the United States, suppressors are highly regulated and a person must get a special permit to own one. Because this assassination-suppressor link is so strong in peoples' minds, possession of an unlicensed suppressor, even a homemade one, is a felony offense.

If someone is a professional urban sniper and does not fully understand the capabilities and limitations of a sound suppressor, then they are not a well-rounded sniper. If a sniper fully understands the characteristics of a suppressor – both good and bad – has trained regularly with a suppressor, has tested the suppressor in realistic training and combat, and then decides consciously not to use a suppressor due to tactical reasons, then that is another story. In that situation, the sniper is making an informed, as opposed to an uninformed, decision.

Ambush in Iraq

Let me tell a short story about John, an acquaintance of mine, who recently served in combat in Iraq. One afternoon in Iraq, John and his team were ambushed as they drove down a road to investigate reports of an insurgent attack on an Iraqi army checkpoint. As the enemy opened fire, John and his men quickly got off the road and fought their way into a nearby row of houses that lined the ambush zone. John, a trained and experienced sniper, was armed with an SPR Mk12 5.56 mm suppressed sniper rifle. John, and his spotter Mike, moved to an elevated position in one of the buildings so they could have a commanding view of the surrounding terrain.

From this perch, John and Mike had an excellent view of the immediate battlefield and could see several insurgent positions. Soon, Apache gunships arrived to support them. As the Apaches circled overhead like giant, angry insects, the helicopters took fire from the insurgents. John searched for targets and saw an insurgent aiming an RPG at the Apaches floating slowly above. John aimed at the RPG gunner and put him down with a single head shot. John soon found other targets. An insurgent armed with an AK-47 stepped around a corner and then took a round from John in the chest, knocking him off his feet. Another insurgent stepped around the corner and looked around, trying to find the source of the gunfire. *Pfffft!* John hit him too, killing him just like the first one.

In the space of about five minutes, John located, engaged, and killed thirteen insurgents in an enclosed urban area where the longest shot taken was about 200 meters and most of the shots were half that distance or less. The only reason why John made so many kills in such a short space of time at such close distances was because he used a suppressed weapon. He killed one enemy, and then another, and then another because they had no idea where the deadly shots were coming from. They could not hear the shots and they could not see a muzzle flash. What prevented John from making more kills was that his spotter, Mike, started firing at the enemy too, but his weapon was not suppressed. As soon as the insurgents heard and saw Mike’s gunfire, they knew where to hide from.

Mk 12 SPR 5.56 mm Sniper Rifle

John takes aim with his SPR equipped with a very quiet Ops, Inc, detachable sound suppressor. This photo was taken a month after John fought off an insurgent ambush with this same weapon.

It was no surprise to John that a suppressed weapon helped him fight off a much larger, heavier armed foe. He knew suppressed weapons could give his small team an advantage in an urban environment because he trained with suppressors before deploying to combat. In fact, every man on John’s team carried a suppressor on their kit. It was a mandatory piece of equipment just like their radios and night vision goggles. They knew the advantages of the suppressors (there are many) and they knew the disadvantages (there are a few). In short, they were trained and skilled in the tactical employment of suppressors for combat operations.

Advantages of a Suppressor

If there are so many advantages of using a suppressor, what are they? First, a suppressor, because it totally encases the muzzle of the weapon, almost completely hides the muzzle flash of the weapon. In fact, from a distance, even at night, it’s almost impossible to even know a weapon is being fired. One might be able to see a small flash of light inside the suppressor itself, but this small signature is easily lost among the much brighter, more noticeable lights of a city’s background like streetlights, car headlights, and normal house lamps. Also, one must understand, a weapon emits some flash/fire from any space that is not totally enclosed. For example, when firing a semi-automatic weapon, some flash can be seen as the action works, ejects, and chambers another round. Even with a revolver, some flash can be seen where the cylinder meets the barrel. While these flashes are small compared to the enormous flash from the barrel, the shooter still needs to take this signature into account and employ good concealment techniques to compensate for it.

As the suppressor conceals a weapon’s muzzle flash, it also eliminates muzzle blast and any resulting muzzle disturbance. Anyone who has fired a weapon in a dry climate, like the Middle East, can attest as to how much signature is created by muzzle blast. After firing a high-powered rifle, a small cloud of dust erupts in front of the shooter, giving their position away. In daylight hours, this muzzle disturbance is more incriminating and revealing than the muzzle flash, which, in contrast, can hardly be seen. When a shooter uses a suppressor their tactical options multiply because they do not have to worry about hiding their muzzle blast. A shooter can lie on the ground, or put their muzzle near a dirty, dusty window frame and fire a shot without fear of giving their position away.

Just as a suppressor nearly eliminates muzzle flash and blast, a can does an excellent job of what it was designed for - reducing the audible noise heard when a shot is fired. Most modern suppressors will reduce the sound of a weapon until it is no louder than a car door being shut. With this level of noise reduction, a shooter can easily combine their muffled gunshot with urban cover noise like music, a motorcycle revving, and even a honking car horn to conceal the gunshot from the target and the surrounding population. Ultimately, a sound suppressor is the best form of urban camouflage. If a sniper allows their muzzle blast and flash to be seen and their gunshot to be heard, it is the equivalent of the sniper jumping up and down, waving a big red flag, and yelling to the entire city, “Hey everyone, look at me, I’m a sniper, and I just fired a shot from a hidden position!” Of course, it does not make any tactical sense to jump up and down and scream and wave a red flag and it does not make any sense to fire a rifle without a suppressor.

Another advantage of a suppressor is it allows for better weapons control by eliminating what is called “muzzle flip” or “muzzle climb.” There is a whole industry designed to increase muzzle control through such attachments like muzzle brakes and muzzle compensators. Why use these devices when one can use a suppressor that works even better? The fact is that a suppressor eliminates muzzle climb and works much better than any muzzle brake or compensator. On top of this, a suppressor reduces weapon recoil, improving the shooter’s control of the weapon. All I ask the reader to do is take a simple test. Take your weapon and fire an entire magazine as fast as you can at a 25-meter target and see what kind of control you have. Then, attach a suppressor and take the same test. Tell me which one offers better control. The truth is, a suppressor enables a shooter to rapidly and accurately engage multiple targets because their barrel will stay on target the entire time.

While muzzle control is a big concern when firing a semi-automatic weapon, does the shooter really care about muzzle control when firing a bolt-action, lever-action, revolving action, or break-open weapon? Yes, the experienced shooter does care about muzzle control, even with non-automatic weapons. This is because a sniper wants to stay on their target throughout the engagement process. Even a sniper firing a bolt-action rifle wants to maintain the same sight picture until they are done servicing the target. Especially when a sniper fires a large-bore rifle like a 7.62 mm or a .50 caliber weapon, muzzle control is difficult and it takes a second for the shooter to compose themselves and get back on target after making a shot. A suppressor, which is also the world’s best muzzle brake, speeds up the entire engagement process.

Gemtech Integra 5.56

The Integra is a 16.1" upper receiver that attaches to an AR15 lower receiver providing an integral suppressor. It weighs 5 lbs. with an MSRP of $1,875.00. The Integra maintains 131 decibels during firing. In the U.S., the owner is not required to get a Short Barrel Rifle stamp from the ATF.

Because a suppressor eliminates muzzle flash and muzzle blast, one can use a suppressed weapon in ways and in environments that would otherwise be off limits. For example, if a person is sitting in the front passenger seat of a car, armed with a suppressed MP5SD submachine-gun, they can shoot in close proximity to the driver, or anyone else in the car, without fear of injuring them. Specifically, they can aim their weapon across the front of the driver, with the suppressor only inches from their face, and fire out the driver-side window at their target, all without fear of blowing out the driver's eardrum or blinding him with the muzzle flash or burning his face with the muzzle blast. With a suppressed weapon, they can work in confined spaces and in close proximity (within inches) of other people and do so in a completely safe manner.

The use of a suppressor also allows one to work in a potentially hazardous environment with reduced risk of injury. For instance, police officers who regularly raid methadone labs use suppressed weapons because if they fire an unsuppressed weapon in an enclosed space like a drug lab, they can cause an explosion due to the volatile gases given off by the methadone-making process. A suppressed weapon enables a shooter to operate in close proximity to explosive or flammable gases with much less chance of igniting them.

There are a whole variety of tactical tasks that can be accomplished quietly when using a suppressed weapon. For instance, one can quietly shoot out a streetlight with a suppressed weapon in order to hide in the darkness. One can shoot a barking dog with a suppressed weapon and quietly remove this potentially mission compromising threat. A sentry or guard can be discretely removed with a single, quiet shot from a suppressed .22 caliber pistol. A car’s tires can be shot out in near silence or a window can be shattered with a few well-aimed, quiet shots. An electrical junction or phone relay box can also be quietly put out of action with a suppressed weapon, prior to conducting an assault. These are just several examples from a whole list of things that can be accomplished with a suppressed weapon.

From a command and control aspect, suppressors bring a lot to the table. The single biggest obstacle to effective communication during a gunfight is the inability to hear or to be heard over the roar of gunshots. Regularly, in combat, soldiers are unable to communicate effectively on a radio or even give or receive simple directions from fellow teammates because somebody is on the machine-gun pounding away at a target.

Another problem presented in combat is the use of earplugs. Whenever someone is on a combat patrol, and contact is likely, most people put a hearing plug in one ear and have the other one in their pocket. This way they can cut their hearing losses, because while they are moving, they can still at least hear out of one ear. But, if they suddenly have enemy contact and have to fire unsuppressed weapons, they will not destroy the hearing in both of their ears – they would damage only one of them - until they get the other earplug in. The use of suppressors eliminates this potential for temporary and permanent hearing damage, one does not have to worry about juggling earplugs, and one does not have to yell at anybody to be heard.

Suppressing a weapon is useful for more than just combat operations, they are also useful in training. It is far easier to train a new shooter using a suppressed weapon because the shooter will not suffer from flinching, bracing, eye-closing, and anticipating the shot like they would if the weapon was unsuppressed and had the normal muzzle flash, blast, gunshot, recoil, and muzzle climb. With a suppressor, a new shooter can focus on the fundamentals of marksmanship as opposed to weathering the blast of an unsuppressed weapon. In short, a suppressor makes a weapon more pleasant to shoot, reduces gun-shyness, and instills confidence in beginners.

Other Suppressor Considerations

There are several disadvantages to using a suppressor, all of which can be compensated for in some way and, in my opinion, are far outweighed by the advantages. The biggest problem with using a suppressor is it extends the overall length of a weapon, making it less concealable. But this all depends on the weapon and the type of suppressor used. Some pistols, like the famed Ruger Mk II, have integral suppressors, meaning that the suppressor is not detachable and is actually part of the weapon. Weapons like these are usually shorter in length than a pistol with a suppressor attached to the end of it.

SIG MCX SURG

Sig Sauer inked a $48 million deal with SOCOM in 2018 for the Suppressed Upper Receiver Group contract which was renewed through 2025. The SURG has an 11.5" barrel and is designed for use in close quarter environments.

Weight is another consideration when using a suppressor, although modern suppressors are very light - most weigh around a pound - and some rifle suppressors are as light as seven ounces! The overall weight is not a serious problem. The real problem is this weight is at the end of the barrel, making the weapon barrel-heavy and harder to maneuver. One way to solve this problem is to use a weapon with an integral suppressor so there is no imbalance in the weapon from the start. Another option is to choose a suppressor that is short and overlaps the front of the barrel as much as possible, thus moving the suppressor's weight towards the center of the weapon. Weapon imbalance may not be an issue if one plans on taking a slow deliberate shot and fires from a stable platform like a bipod.

Perhaps the most serious consideration when using a suppressor is it affects the barrel harmonics and performance of the weapon. Again, it all depends on the suppressor and the weapon used. If a weapon has an integral suppressor and a free-floating barrel, then the weapon will not suffer from any adverse effects. However, if one places a quick-attach suppressor to the end of a barrel, this will affect the barrel harmonics enough to affect bullet placement. So, if a shooter is zeroed with their weapon without a suppressor and then places a muzzle-hanging suppressor on their weapon, they will get different shot placement. A solution to this is to zero the weapon with the suppressor attached to it.

Importantly, a shooter should want to fire their weapon with a suppressor attached because the suppressor positively impacts barrel harmonics, meaning it reduces muzzle whip and increases accuracy. Surefire Inc., which makes several kinds of high-quality sound suppressors, says their suppressors not only act as a harmonics dampener, but increase bullet velocity by as much as fifty feet per second. Obviously, before using a suppressor on an actual operation, the shooter must train with their weapon, and measure how bullet placement is affected by the suppressor, to determine how the suppressor affects their overall shooting.

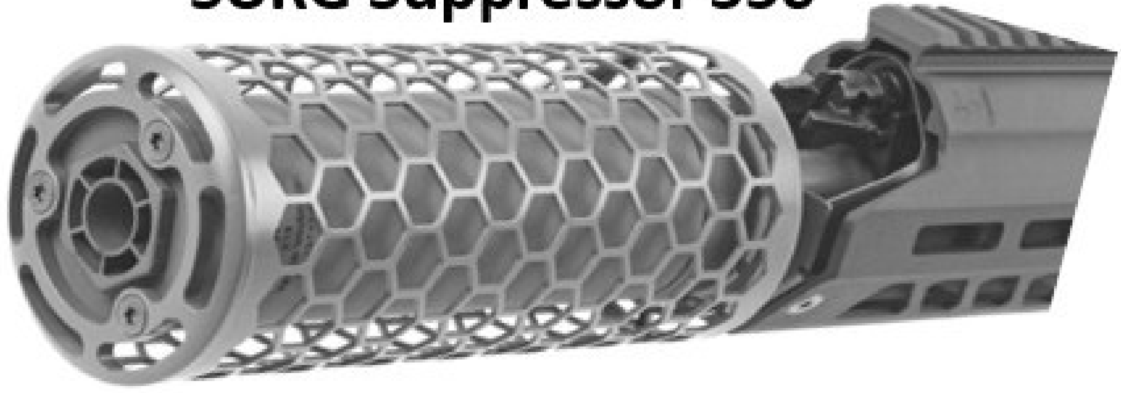
Considerations for the Guerrilla

A guerrilla sniper using a suppressor has other considerations above and beyond these tactical issues. Only conventional military and law enforcement snipers have the luxury of focusing strictly on tactical concerns. To start, the guerrilla must be concerned with how they acquire the suppressor. Because suppressors are viewed by most as an exotic accessory, they may be hard to come by on the battlefield and this scarcity will drive up prices. Consequently, suppressors are generally an expensive item compared to more mundane items like ammunition and collapsible stocks. This rarity may raise eyebrows from whoever is selling the suppressor. If the seller is a black marketer, there may be no problem. But if the seller is legitimate, it will be hard to explain why you need a sound suppressor – so you do not disturb your neighbors while you target shoot?

In almost every country, a sound suppressor has to be acquired illegally, through the black market, battlefield recovery, theft, or other means. This is because a suppressor, which is instantly tied to assassinations, cannot be bought casually or anonymously. In the United States, the government requires a person to get a license to possess a suppressor. This means the buyer must show redundant forms of identification, state the reason for wanting to own one, have no criminal record that would disqualify them from ownership, and state the address where the suppressor will be maintained. In other words, you cannot get a suppressor anonymously. In the Russian territories, specifically Chechnya, suppressors are not allowed for civilian use. This is not surprising considering Russia has strict gun laws preventing widespread ownership of handguns, outlaw night-vision scopes, and requires every weapon sold to fire a bullet into a soft target for a ballistics comparison in case the weapon is ever suspected of being used in a future crime.

One should note that the use of a suppressor in combat is legal according to the laws of land warfare. An irregular combatant, like a guerrilla sniper, can use a suppressor during combat operations and be in full compliance with international law. While international law does not forbid the use of suppressors, it is the individual countries that restrict their sale and impose national laws on their use. This puts the guerrilla sniper in such a position that they are not committing a war crime but may violate a state’s internal laws.

SURG Suppressor 556



Sig Sauer put a titanium cage around the suppressor to provide protection when superheated. The suppressor Inconel core baffle system is made of a nickel, chromium, iron alloy which resists high-temperature corrosion.

Since a guerrilla has to violate national law to get a suppressor, they understand they must hide this incriminating evidence from the authorities just like they hide their illegal firearms. If a person is found with a suppressor, but not a gun, what possible reason do they have for possessing this proscribed item? A suppressor cannot be used for anything but to muffle the sound of a gunshot. It has no dual purpose that can be explained away. What is the guerrilla going to say when caught red-handed during a raid or stopped at a checkpoint, “Oh, I found this by the side of the road and I thought it would make a really cool paperweight.” That will not hold up in a court of law or even a battlefield interrogation.

All of these legal ramifications are exactly what the guerrilla organization must keep in mind and prepare for upon compromise, because the government fighting the guerrilla will use the full weight of their legal system as a counter-insurgency tool to put pressure on illegal combatants. In the United States, possession of an unregistered suppressor is a felony offense, regardless if it is attached to a weapon or not. In Northern Ireland, if an IRA sniper is captured with a sniper rifle and a suppressor, they just doubled their jail time.

Possession of a suppressor also brings to bear the issue of intent. If a guerrilla is caught with a folding-stock Armalite carbine under their car seat, it is hard to prove what their intent was. Maybe they were going to go target shooting. Maybe they were going to go hunting. Maybe they were going to turn it in to the police. Maybe they were going to sell it to somebody. Maybe they were dropping it off to someone else. Maybe they were going to kill somebody. If we add the suppressor to the equation, it is harder for the guerrilla to explain their intent as something less than lethal. In contrast, government prosecutors will have a much easier time convincing a judge or jury of criminal or terrorist intent, which will then add years of prison time, as opposed to a lighter sentence for mere weapons possession.

Improvised Suppressors

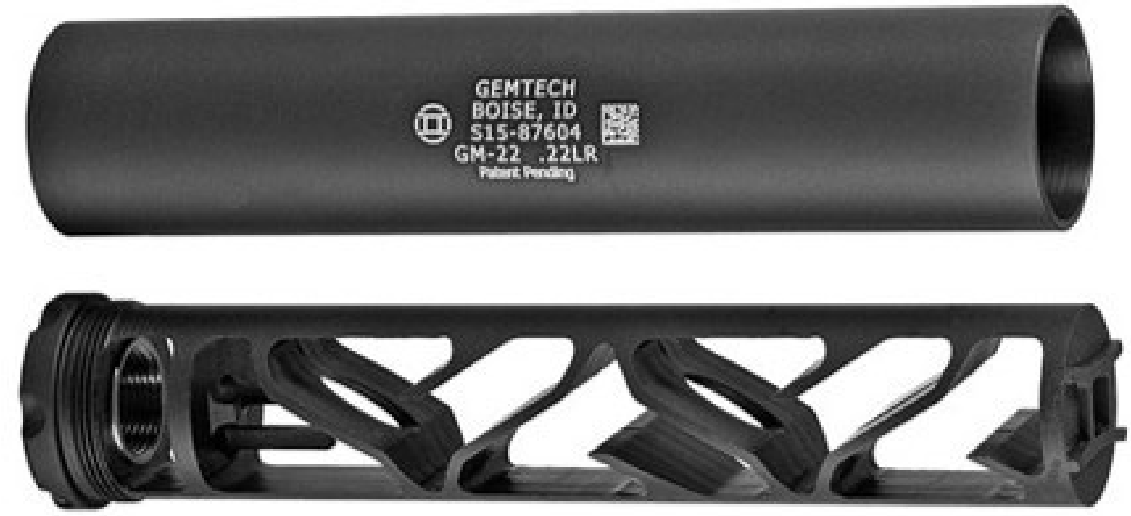
Since a government will go to extra lengths to keep commercially manufactured suppressors out of the guerrillas' hands, a few words on improvised sound suppressors is warranted. First, it is not difficult to make an effective, improvised suppressor that is nearly as effective as a manufactured one. The best improvised sound suppressors are those copied and reverse engineered in a workshop by someone who has experience in metal fabricating. Guerrilla organizations like the FARC in Colombia have the manpower, resources, and technical know-how to take a commercially manufactured suppressor and then recreate their own in FARC-run metal shops. Although World War II resistance movements did not fully appreciate suppressed weapons, some groups, like the Polish Underground, had the ability to fabricate their own suppressors if they wanted to as they did make their own sub-machine guns, explosives, hand-grenades, and other weapons.

There are many detailed books, videos and blogs on the market today that show the interested reader how to make improvised suppressors in their own garage using materials that are easily and legally purchased at the local hardware store. This is not reverse engineering, this is making a suppressor out of commercially available items like a metal pipe and washers that require simple tools like a hack saw, a file, and a soldering gun. Some weapons are easier to fit with an improvised suppressor than others. The M4 assault rifle in particular uses a suppressor that snaps on. Other weapons like purpose-built sniper rifles, with nothing for a suppressor to snap onto, require the suppressor to be secured to the barrel using a tightening device like ones that can be found on a bicycle seat. You can legally make a homemade suppressor in the U.S. if you register it with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. If not, it is a felony offense.

Suppressor Use in Modern Warfare

Since we have established that a suppressor is crucial for successful urban sniping (even more so for the guerrilla), then guerrilla movements all over the world must be using them, right? Wrong. Most guerrilla organizations are as ignorant of the benefits of a modern suppressor as are conventional snipers, perhaps even more so. Guerrilla snipers, like their conventional opponents, have spent most of their efforts adapting their sniping tactics to deal with the gunshot, instead of spending the time and resources on getting a suppressor by hook or crook. Some resistance movements, by sheer chance, have stumbled upon the benefits of suppressed weapons, but most have not.

Gemtech GM-22



This shows the internal monocore baffle system of the GM-22 .22LR suppressor. It is 5" long and just 2.7 oz with a $399.00 MSRP. Due to its simplicity, the monocore design is easier to maintain and clean

The French resistance in World War II used suppressed weapons on occasions, but they never developed a strong sniper movement against the invading Germans. Some Palestinian snipers used suppressed rifles against the Israelis, but these incidents were so rare, such an occurrence created quite a commotion on the Israeli side. The Iraqi insurgents eventually used suppressed sniper rifles, but not on a large scale. This was despite an Iraqi insurgent website posting a video of a guerrilla cell fabricating homemade suppressors by the hundreds. The resistance movement that used suppressors the most were the Chechens. This was due to operational mimicking because the Russians themselves used suppressed weapons on such a relatively large scale. The Chechens, in turn, saw their effectiveness and then stole, captured, or bought suppressors on the black market to copy the Russian tactics.

While we can name a few movements that have employed suppressors, far more never did. What about Carlos Marighella, the Brazilian revolutionary who fought in the 1960s, whose ideas on urban guerrilla warfare are studied today? He mentions the importance of the urban sniper in his much-cited work *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*, but he never makes the tactical leap to suppressed sniping. The IRA didn't use suppressed sniper systems from 1969-1998 despite displaying some of the most sophisticated urban guerrilla warfare methodology to date. And in Sarajevo, 1992-1996, where concentrated urban sniping took place, suppressed sniping was a rarity. Finally, I served in three different urban areas in Afghanistan (2009, 2011, 2019) and never heard of the Taliban employing urban sniping never mind suppressed systems

Of course, guerrilla movements suffer from the same lack of foresight, leadership, and innovation that their conventional opponents do. Just because a resistance movement grasps the fundamentals of urban sniping does not mean they are experts in their discipline. However, a lack of understanding of the tools of their trade might make a guerrilla sniper an endangered species. This is because the threat to the unsuppressed shooter is very real as every human being is their own gunshot detection device, armed with two ears and two eyes that can accurately and instantly determine the general location of a gunshot. As modern warfare becomes more technically oriented and acoustic counter-sniper devices grow in popularity, the importance of the sound suppressor becomes apparent.

Chapter 7

Asymmetric Sniping

Unconventional strategies and tactics adopted by a force when the military capabilities of belligerent powers are not simply unequal but are so significantly different that they cannot make the same sorts of attacks on each other.

- Encyclopedia Britannica

Guerrilla Tactics + Heavy Caliber Rifles = Asymmetric Sniping

While close-in sniper shots like that of Juba are the hallmark of urban warfare, longer distance ones are possible. For instance, during the siege of Sarajevo, the Serbians dug into the surrounding hills could take shots into the city from a mile away. Also, sometimes the urban terrain lends itself to a long shot. Every city, with their deliberately planned layout, has straightaways of varying distances that can be used to make a long shot. We must remember that using an elevated firing position allows the sniper to shoot over urban obstacles to make long distance shots. Think of the German and Russian snipers firing from the smokestacks of Stalingrad's factory district, giving them a mile of observation in all directions.

Along with extreme range, a heavy caliber sniper rifle will penetrate urban mediums like steel, concrete, glass, and wood. This means normal sniper counter-measures like staying behind 'bulletproof" glass and traveling in armored vehicles no longer provides protection. In fact, when a large caliber rifle's penetrating power is combined with its long range, most counter-sniper measures are rendered ineffective. The ability to penetrate and accurately hit intended targets at distance also means a heavy sniper rifle can be used to attack just about anything like planes, helicopters, boats, armored cars, tanks, and fuel farms. Consequently, the lone gunman using a heavy caliber sniper rifle against ill-protected targets is truly an example of asymmetric warfare. How else could a single person immobilize a warship, destroy a Stealth bomber, or render ineffective a nuclear submarine?

A Brief History of Heavy Sniping

Modern heavy caliber sniper rifles are the product of several historical influences. One of the first heavy caliber rifles used in modern warfare was the Germans' 13.2 mm anti-tank rifle made by Mauser, called the "Tankgewehr M1918." The drive to develop this large weapon originated with the German army's frustration in dealing with the French and British tanks, which deflected normal-size bullets. In response, Mauser developed their bolt-action anti-tank rifle in early 1918. However, the Germans used their 13.2 mm behemoths for more than just anti-armor operations, they also targeted enemy snipers. Interestingly enough, after the war was over, the American military used captured Mauser 13.2 mm rifles to test .50 caliber cartridges in their efforts to develop a new .50 caliber heavy machine gun.

New Zealand soldiers hold the M1918.

The British World War I snipers also used heavy caliber rifles from their trenches against their German foes, but for different reasons.

The British had a problem with German snipers because the Germans began firing from behind pre-fabricated steel plates impervious to the British's regular .303 caliber rounds. In order to defeat the Germans' steel sniper shields, the British brought into country large caliber hunting rifles, called "elephant guns" because they were originally used to hunt large game on the African plains.

While heavy caliber rifles were in their infancy in The Great War, World War II saw a veritable explosion of anti-tank guns. The Germans produced their Panzerbusche 38 and 39 models, fielding tens of thousands of them against the Polish army in 1939, against the British in North Africa, and against the Russians on the Eastern Front. The British developed their Boys .55 caliber anti-tank rifle in the late 1930's, which could penetrate about 20 mm of armor when fired perpendicular to the target. The Russians had their PRTD-41 bolt-action, anti-tank rifle, which they used in large numbers on the Eastern Front. The PTRD-41 fired a 14.5 x 114 mm tungsten steel core round that could punch through 40 mm of vertical armor at a 90-degree angle (meaning it could penetrate the side armor of most German tanks at close range). A variety of other countries fielded anti-tank rifles as well like Switzerland, Poland, Finland, and Japan. Ultimately, as tank armor grew in thickness, the man-portable anti-tank rifle became almost useless. However, by pure chance and sheer necessity, both the German and Russian sides on occasion tried using anti-tank guns for sniping. This was not widespread at the time because these anti-tank rifles were relatively crude, inaccurate, and not designed for use with a scope.

Although the United States in World War I and II did not field anti-tank rifles, American soldiers did experiment with firing their M2 .50 caliber machine-guns on single shot with a scope. Perhaps the first .50 caliber rifle intended specifically for sniping was fabricated in 1946 by Frank Conway, an ordnance officer stationed at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland. Conway took a German Panzerbusche 39, replaced the existing barrel with a .50 caliber machine-gun barrel, added a muzzle break, attached a bipod near the muzzle, and added a scope. With this custom sniper system, Conway could hit targets at 1400 yards and place rounds through a building's window at 2800 yards.

Despite these successes, little official interest was generated in the .50 caliber sniper rifle concept. The weapon seemed too large, crude, and unorthodox for the Army’s conventionally minded military leaders.

During the Korean War, the Marine Corps recognized the usefulness of large caliber sniping and the First Marine Division included sniping with a .50 caliber M2 machinegun in their curriculum. Major Hicks, USMC, stated, “Each student trained not only with the .30 caliber M1 rifle (or the 03 Springfield, depending on his preference) but also with the .50 caliber machine-gun, fired single shot. Scopes were mounted on the machine guns and they proved to be effective for ranges up to and beyond 1200 yards.”

Once again, just like during World War II, some snipers were dissatisfied with the effectiveness of their current sniper weapons at long range. As a result, an enterprising young captain by the name of William S. Brophy fabricated his own long-range sniper rifle. Brophy, who was an Army ordnance officer, took a .50 caliber aircraft machine-gun barrel and attached it to the frame of a Russian PTRD-41 anti-tank gun (which was captured from the Korean and Chinese forces), and added a bipod and a 20 x power Unertl scope. While field testing this new rifle in Korea, Brophy and his students made kills out to a range of 2000 yards.

Even after further testing and evaluation, the heavy caliber sniper rifle never caught on with the U.S. military and American soldiers fighting in Vietnam in the 1960s and 70s had to make do with firing single shots from their M2 heavy barreled machine-guns. During Vietnam, Marine sniper Carlos Hathcock famously made a single 2,500 meter shot on an enemy with a Browning M2 .50 heavy machine gun using a Unertl 8x scope. To this day, some U.S. military sniper competitions still incorporate the M2 .50 with scope to honor this feat by Hatchcock.

Solothurn S18/1000
Swiss-German 20 mm anti-tank rifle, bullpup, 10 round magazine, 120 lbs.

Breaking the Mold: The Barrett .50 Caliber Sniper Rifle

While the U.S. military showed no interest in designing a long range, heavy caliber, sniping rifle, a private businessman named Ronnie Barrett did. Barrett saw the need for a mobile, accurate, large caliber sniper rifle and was intent on designing and manufacturing one. In 1982, after working on a design in his garage workshop, Barrett fabricated his own .50 caliber sniper rifle. This ground-breaking design would later become the Model 82A1.

The M82 proved to be a breakthrough, and even though the weapon was big, it had very low recoil, was easy to use, and could hit targets accurately at a mile and more. Barrett finally proved you could fabricate a purpose-built .50 caliber sniper rifle with the desired results in accuracy and range. After refining his original product, Barrett garnered some interest from the U.S. military as well as private shooting enthusiasts. The Marines employed .50 caliber rifles while deployed to Beirut in 1983 and a Navy SEAL unit used .50 caliber rifles during the invasion of Grenada in the same year.

After the M82 proved itself over the ensuing years, especially during the First Gulf War, manufacturers all over the world began to produce their own versions of the .50 caliber sniping rifle. While Barrett had the market cornered for the first years after his initial design, today, there is a veritable flood of similar weapons. Russia now has a heavy caliber sniper rifle, as does South Africa, Austria, Britain, and Germany just to name few. Also, a whole new crop of American arms companies has bloomed, all producing their own versions of the heavy caliber sniping rifle. In 2005, the U.S. Army officially designated Barrett's XM107 (a slightly modified version of the original M82) as its long range sniping rifle. After nearly sixty years of innovation, field testing, and varying degrees of official apathy going as far back as 1946, the U.S. military finally recognized the value of a heavy caliber sniping rifle.

20 mm & 25 mm Rifles

While anti-tank guns like the German's Panzerbusche 39 were of relatively small caliber and the PTRD-41 was "only" 14.5 mm in size, some countries went even bigger. For instance, the Finnish military produced the Lahti 20 mm anti-tank rifle in 1939. The Lahti proved to be successful against Russia's light tanks out to a distance of 400 meters and, due to its accuracy, it was also used for smaller targets like machine-gun nests and enemy bunkers. The Lahti was a large weapon weighing over 100 pounds and was pulled on a sled in snowy conditions. The Japanese also produced a 20 mm anti-tank rifle, the Type 97, which weighed in at over 130 pounds and could penetrate more than an inch of steel at 300 meters. The Japanese Imperial Army only fielded several hundred of these enormous weapons which required at least two men to manhandle them. Also, Rheinmetall in collaboration with Swiss company Waffenfabrik Solothurn made a 20 mm antitank gun.

The 20 mm anti-tank rifle died a quick death after the war but saw a comeback in recent times where modern manufacturing methods have produced lightweight, man portable weapons that can be carried and employed by a single person. In the early 1990's, South Africa developed the NTW-20 anti-material rifle and in 1998 the South African National Defense Force began fielding it in numbers.

The NTW-20 has a range of over 1500 meters and at a weight of about 57 pounds - the rifle can be broken down into two equal-size loads - it is truly man portable. At about the same time, Croatia, which was engaged in an ugly war with neighboring Serbia, developed its RT-20 anti-material/anti-tank rifle. The RT-20 fires a high-velocity 2000-grain 20 mm round at speeds of 2500 feet per second. This high-powered round, which can reach out to 1800 meters, produces a great deal of recoil which is dampened by a special recoil tube fitted above the receiver. This single shot, bolt-action rifle is considerably lighter than the NT-20 and weighs in at only 45 pounds.

Perhaps the best 20 mm rifle out there is Anzio Ironworks's 20 mm takedown rifle which only weighs 39 pounds! The Anzio takedown fires a 20 mm Vulcan round that weighs 1600 grains and travels at a velocity of 3300 feet per second. Believe it or not, when the Anzio takedown is fitted with a sound suppressor, it has relatively little recoil or muzzle flash. Especially important for the sniper who needs to conceal their activities, the Anzio 20 mm rifle comes with a custom carrying case which the weapon fits in when disassembled.

With the growth in popularity of the .50 caliber and 20 mm models, there was enough interest to produce an even larger anti-material rifle of the 25 mm size. The 25 mm rifle is an elite category because few such models are available for retail. When one talks about 25 mm rifles, they are really talking about Ronnie Barrett's XM109 which is a modification of the original M82. Essentially, the XM109 is an M82 with a different upper receiver. The XM109 is truly in a class of its own, weighing in at a slim 33 pounds, it fires a 25 mm HEDP round (High Explosive Dual Purpose), has a range of 2500 meters and can penetrate 40 mm of armor out to 500 meters.

The modern heavy caliber sniper rifle has come a long way since Mauser's original M1918 design in WWII.

by M. Blesam

A U.S. soldier fires an M2 at the International Sniper Competition, Fort Benning, GA (2018).

Anti-Material Sniping

Modern heavy caliber sniper rifles began as anti-tank weapons. However, as the armor of tanks and other armored vehicles improved during World War II, the antitank rifle grew out of favor and was not effective considering its weight and relative inaccuracy. Now, with the design of modern heavy caliber rifles that have excellent range, good penetrating power, and can be disassembled and carried by a single person, the old anti-tank gun is back in vogue. With these new lightweight models, the modern urban sniper has a whole range of targets they can disable or eliminate with accurate aimed fire. One of the primary targets for the modern heavy caliber sniper is the armored vehicle, for which it was first created. At first, one might not think a main battle tank would be vulnerable to the humble sniper, but through study and intelligent shot placement, the urban sniper can immobilize a heavy tank.

First, a tank can only protect its crew if they are actually inside the vehicle. Since a tank can get extremely hot inside, tank crew members often ride on top of their vehicles or open up their access hatches to let air in the vehicle in order to cool off. And because armored vehicles offer their crews such poor visibility of the surrounding urban terrain, tank drivers and tank commanders often stick their heads out of their hatches in order to see better. On other occasions, crew members open their hatches and expose themselves when talking to other ground soldiers.

For whatever reason crew members expose themselves, they become targets. During the battle for Stalingrad, Russian snipers intentionally waited for panzer crew members to expose themselves so they could be picked off. This practice hurt the Germans because trained panzer crews were extremely valuable and hard to replace because of the large numbers of casualties suffered in the Stalingrad slaughterhouse. Sixty years later, American tank crewmen in Iraq found themselves prime targets for insurgent snipers as they stuck their heads out of their hatches to watch for the enemy. The urban sniper taking careful aim at a main battle tank is a true example of asymmetric warfare where the tank, which is designed for high intensity warfare, is incapable of detecting and surgically eliminating a carefully hidden sniper who takes advantage of the city's urban clutter.

I had the chance to talk to members of an Abrams tank unit in Iraq who were victim of an insurgent sniper attack. When the incident happened, the tank unit was patrolling an area. As they drove slowly down a road, the driver had his head out of the hatch so he could see the narrow road better. Unknown to the unit, a small insurgent element set up an ambush site in a cluster of buildings near the road. As the tank approached the buildings, the sniper opened fire and shot the driver of the tank, killing him. The insurgents then ran out of the buildings, swam a nearby canal, jumped in a waiting car, and drove off. The tank unit was unable to detect the hidden sniper before the attack, they never saw the shooter make the shot, and they were unable to pursue their attackers because the cluster of buildings provided the insurgents with visual screening until they were safely across the water and in their car. What was the tank unit supposed to do now? There was nobody to blow up with their 120 mm cannons. Also, the unit had to treat their wounded man, which meant they had to immediately leave the area and go to a nearby aid station.

Shooting an armored vehicle crew member is pretty easy. If the sniper sees a person they shoot them. On the other hand, learning to physically disable a main battle tank takes homework and the sniper must know the vulnerable points of the vehicle. The sniper can learn this any number of ways like buying books about their targets or reading articles on the internet. One way to get an intimate understanding of an armored vehicle is to build a plastic model of it, like the ones at a hobby shop. Often times these model kits offer the builder more detailed knowledge of the vehicle than reading any book.

An American sniper in Fallujah takes aim behind a Barrett .50 rifle.

Photo by DoD

Common vulnerable points on armored vehicles include vision ports, thermal imaging sights, engine compartments, and the vehicle's roof, especially where the access hatches are. If a sniper shoots out the vision ports, driving becomes difficult for the crew and they may have to stick their heads out to see, making them even more vulnerable to follow on shots. Shooting out thermal imagers and other weapon targeting systems will immobilize the vehicle's main gun, making them less of a threat. If a sniper has the chance, they can also shoot the vehicle from the rear, because that is traditionally where armored vehicles have the thinnest armor and is usually where the engine is located. So, by hitting the engine compartment at the weak spot, a sniper can get a mobility kill on the vehicle. Finally, a sniper can try to get a top-down shot on a vehicle from an elevated position because the armor is thinner on top. Also, the armor on the vehicle is weakest at the hatches and wherever there is a hatch, there is usually a person. Consequently, the hatches make a convenient aiming point for the shooter.

It is useful to understand the majority of the world's armored personnel carriers and armored trucks are designed only to stop shell fragments and 7.62 mm rounds and smaller. These armored personnel carriers cannot withstand .50 caliber sniper fire. Vehicles like Russia's BTR-60/70/80 series only stop small arms fire and a 20 mm rifle with armor piercing ammunition will smoke right through the thin armor of a BTR like it was butter. With the advent of the lightweight, portable 20/25 mm rifle, a single shooter can hide in a building, shoot through a small loophole, and defeat any armored vehicle out there short of a main battle tank. The takedown 20/25 mm rifle combined with an urban setting gives the shooter a definite advantage over the light armored

vehicles most of the world's armies use today.

But let us be clear what we are talking about here. There are many exaggerated claims of what anti-material sniping can accomplish and we must be realistic about a heavy rifle's capabilities. Only the informed, surgical targeting of an armored vehicle will work. If a sniper shoots out a tank's thermal imaging system, the tank can still drive and fire its weapons; it just may not be able to fire accurately. A sniper may shoot and kill a tank commander, but the rest of the crew will still be able to maneuver their vehicle and fire their weapons systems. Most likely, an anti-tank sniper will inconvenience a tank or make the vehicle retreat for repairs or to help a wounded crew member. The sniper will probably not permanently disable the tank. In Stalingrad, Russian anti-tank riflemen shot up plenty of German panzers, but the Germans recovered the majority of them, repaired them, and sent them back in action. Some of these Russian anti-tank gunners were not so lucky the second and third times around and were eventually gunned down by the panzers they already shot up and disabled multiple times before.

Targeting Airports and Aircraft

Airports are a prominent feature of the world's modern major cities. Many airports are located close enough to urban areas that a sniper can target the runway and its aircraft without ever entering the airport property itself. A study of the vulnerability of U.S. military air bases by the Rand Corporation noted, “A clever adversary, faced with the insurmountable dominance of U.S. airpower in the air, could employ what we call an asymmetric strategy , and “A successful attack on a U.S. airbase may have a strategic effect out of proportion to the resources expended.”

Sarajevo International Airport, for one, was within easy reach of the city’s western-most neighborhoods and their high-rise buildings. On more than one occasion the United Nations-run airport had to be shut down due to incoming fire by Serbian shooters. In other instances, civilian airports are isolated to some degree from major urban areas to limit the inconvenience caused by the noise of continually landing aircraft. Even with these airports, there are many buildings on the airport property itself and many spots to park a car that can be used as a sniper hide.

Once a sniper gets within range of the airport, they can destroy an entire air force in just minutes because most aircraft are fragile machines that are unable to take punishment. The same Rand report identified this issue, “Indeed, the complexity and sophistication of modern aircraft may make them more vulnerable. For example, superficial shrapnel damage to a stealthy aircraft’s aerodynamic surfaces would do more than just affect flight characteristics: It would increase its radar cross section (RCS), making it more vulnerable to detection and, hence, impairing its operational effectiveness even if no vital components were damaged. Further, repairing the composite skin to restore the original RCS would not be a trivial undertaking. Alternatively, consider the effect of .50 caliber sniper rifle rounds fired through an AWACS radome, struts, or fuselage: Regardless of precisely where the bullets struck, substantial damage to the delicate electronics packed into this aircraft would probably ensue – in contrast to the P-51’s and F-86’s of the 1940s and 1950s, which were largely aluminum skins wrapped around empty space, making these aircraft much less vulnerable to one or two rifle bullets passing through the airframe.”

Frankfurt Main
Lufthansa
RBS
The Royal Bank of Scotland Group
B24

This airliner could be easily taken out with shots directed at the engines, the cockpit, or the landing gear. Like most airports, there are plenty of available hide sites for a sniper to set up in.

As the Rand report shows, all it takes is a single .50 caliber bullet through the skin of a domestic airliner to make it un-flyable. Or, a single round through the windshield of a cockpit will ground that aircraft until they replace the glass. More importantly, in the cockpit area of an aircraft are sensitive avionics like radar and weapons control systems, which will be rendered useless with a direct hit and may cost millions to replace. A direct hit to the engines or the internal fuel tanks will ground the aircraft until the engine is replaced or the fuel leak is patched. If the sniper is using incendiary ammunition and is aiming for a plane’s fuel tank, they may even set a fire from the extremely flammable, high-octane jet fuel. And let us remember a plane needs its wheels to taxi and take off, so blowing off the forward wheel at the nose of the aircraft will ground the aircraft, although a tire change is a pretty easy repair to make. Perhaps the best shot a sniper could make is shooting the pilot while they are in the cockpit – no pilot, no flying.

Helicopters are less fragile than aircraft, but they too have their weak spots. Aiming for a helicopter's landing gear is useless since they do not taxi to take off or land. Punching a hole in the cockpit windshield is a waste of time since helicopters do not have pressurized cockpits or interiors like jet aircraft do. Helicopters do have advanced avionics in the cockpit. A good location to place a shot is at the main rotor shaft, which will ground a helicopter until repairs are made. Because helicopters are low, slow flying aircraft that also hover, they are prime targets even in flight. Flying helicopters are especially vulnerable in urban areas because there are so many places a sniper can hide. Even Russia's Mi-24 HIND-D close attack helicopter, which is armored to withstand small arms fire, cannot survive carefully placed rounds from a .50 caliber rifle.

Air bases and airports offer more targets than just airplanes and helicopters, as Rand observed, "An air base is a classic "target-rich environment." Besides the aircraft themselves, air bases offer fuel storage facilities, munitions bunkers, the control tower and operations center, navigation aids, crew housing, maintenance facilities, and aerospace ground equipment."

We cannot forget a civilian airport is a juicy target because it is a major source of revenue for the state. A separate Rand study about the vulnerability of Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) revealed, "Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) is vital to Southern California. It is the airport of choice for over 50 million passengers every year. According to Los Angeles World Airports (LAWA), it provides the Southern California economy with over $70 billion in revenue each year. It is vital to Southern California that LAX is a safe and secure airport." The report found LAX could be victimized in a scenario where, "A sniper set up on airport-adjacent property with a .50-caliber sniper rifle shoots at loaded planes, firing approximately 50 shots over five minutes," and "From a roof of a high-rise building on the airport perimeter, a sniper using a .50-caliber rifle fires at parked and taxiing aircraft."

Targeting Ships

If we think about it, most of the world’s major cities are built on the water. This is because waterways are a major source for trade, commerce, and transportation. Where is Beirut? On the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Where is Baghdad? Astride the Tigris River. Where is Stalingrad? Along the banks of the Volga River. Just as airports are located next to major urban areas, so are waterways and ports. These ports are often even closer to urban areas because there are no concerns about sound restrictions or flight paths as with aircraft. Major naval installations have some sort of security perimeter protecting them, but these perimeters can be infiltrated and there is most likely a building within a mile of the port that can be used to target a seafaring vessel as it enters or exits the relative safety of the docks.

Below, a picture of the Thames River running through London. Any of these vessels below could be effectively targeted with a sniper hidden somewhere in the surrounding buildings. Obvious targets would be the boat cockpits and engine compartments.

Are we a little crazy thinking we can actually take out a battleship or a nuclear submarine with a sniper? Actually, if one studies the characteristics and weaknesses of a seafaring vessel just like they would study a tank or armored car, they will find vulnerable areas that can disable a large sea craft. Case in point: on June 7, 2006, the U.S. Navy held what they call a “sink exercise” off the coast of North Carolina. The targets of the exercise were two Spruance-class guided missile destroyers, the USS Stump and the USS Comte de Grasse. At 563-feet long, 7800 tons, and a crew of 350 men, these sister ships were the biggest destroyers ever built. During the exercise, the navy opened fire on these ships with a variety of weapons systems to determine their effectiveness.

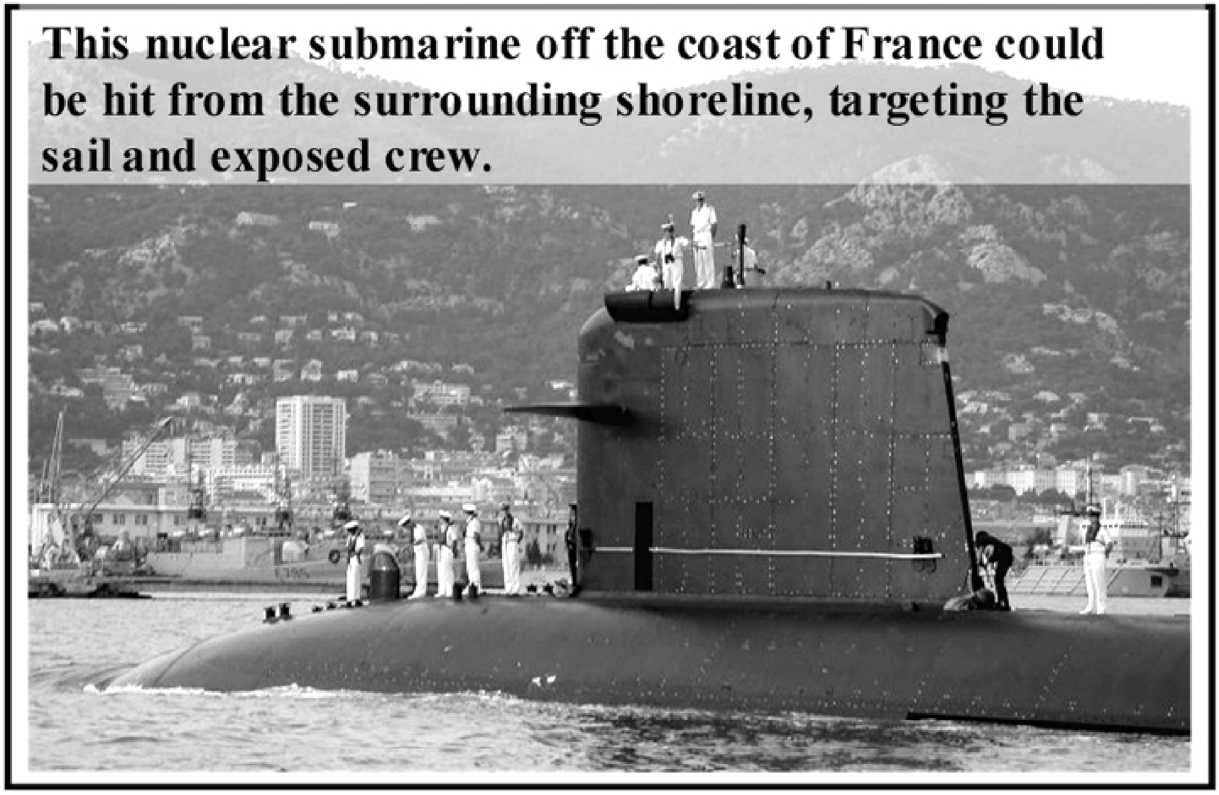
In Jack Dorsey’s article for the Virginian-Pilot he noted, “The Comte de Grass was targeted initially by .50-caliber machine guns to demonstrate disabling fire, then 40 mm grenade launchers and 5-inch guns. The Mason (a U.S. Navy destroyer), using a 20 mm cannon for close-in protection, demonstrated how it could disable a ship without sinking it. “Part of the test was to see how good it was for taking off various parts of the ship, say the rudder post,” Franken said. “We do it to slow the ships,” Weeldreyer said. “It was extremely accurate.” The U.S. Navy already knows accurate .50 caliber and 20 mm fire can disable a ship on the open seas. This means the urban sniper, positioned near a harbor, port, or waterway can also disable ships similar in size as the two sister ships sunk off the coast of North Carolina. The sniper may not be able to get to a ship on the open seas, but they can certainly target it when it is docked for refueling, or for repairs, or for shore leave for its crew.

The real advantage of firing from an urban area at a naval vessel is the David versus Goliath aspect of it. A lone sniper pitted against a massive armored and armed ship is perhaps the distinctive example of asymmetric warfare. For example, let us say a sniper looking to take out a ship is armed with a 20 mm sniper rifle and is hidden in the upper floors of an occupied apartment building. Let us also say the sniper is using good tradecraft, has a sound suppressor on the weapon, and is hidden deep in a room. Most likely, the ship and its crew will be unable to determine from what location the firing is coming from. If the ship and crew did detect the general area or building the fire was coming from, what are they going to do about it?

Open fire with a 5-inch naval gun? Launch a cruise missile? Pound the surrounding city with its 20 mm Phalanx gatling gun?

A sea vessel is not a counter-sniper weapon and is not equipped for the surgical removal of a lone gunman in a populated urban area. If the ship and crew responded to the sniper with their high-powered weapons, they would butcher the surrounding populace and destroy the surrounding infrastructure. If the ship is doing a layover at its home port, then the crew would be killing their own citizens and destroying their own real estate - a win-win situation for the guerrilla sniper. With just a dozen well-aimed shots, the sniper, armed with intimate knowledge of their target, could shoot out the ship's various radar systems, antennas, exposed munitions like anti-ship missiles or depth charges, and various anti-missile countermeasure systems. In the space of 60 seconds, the shooter could render the vessel incapable of conducting seaborne operations, cause millions of dollars of damage, delay launching of the ship until repairs were made, and cause secondary explosions further damaging the vessel.

To effectively cripple an enormous target like a ship, the sniper has to do some target analysis. For the purpose of learning, we will use the HMS Nottingham, which is a British naval vessel. First, if we type the name 'HMS Nottingham' into Google, we get a bunch of links and images back. Then, we select an article from www.wikipedia.com and we get some basic information about the ship. Wikipedia says, "The HMS Nottingham (D91), is a batch two Type 42 Destroyer of the Royal Navy, named after the city of Nottingham, England. She was launched on February 18, 1980, and commissioned on 8 April 1983 and is the sixth ship to bear the name." We also get basic information like the ship weight (4820 tons) and crew size (271 total - 27 Officers, 71 Senior Rates, 173 Junior Rates).



This nuclear submarine off the coast of France could be hit from the surrounding shoreline, targeting the sail and exposed crew.

Now we have some background information, we need something better. Further web surfing reveals an article from www.bbc.co.uk offering a virtual video tour of the ship including the bow, the stern, the hangar, the engine room, and the bridge. Then, from that site we find a link to www.royal-navy.mod.uk where we can surf the Nottingham's official website. On that site, we learn more about the history of the ship to include a picture and biography of the current ship commander. While that information is good as background, we still need the specific components of the ship to target. After some more web surfing, we hit the mother load: www.steelnavy.com, which has a complete model of a type 42 destroyer in pictures, to include the directions and ship components! Of course, studying a big ship like a Type 42 Destroyer could take weeks to find the exact components and the weakest part of those components, but the point is the information is out there and readily available.

Targeting Submarines

Submarines are even more vulnerable to the urban sniper than are surface ships. Most submarines do not even have weapons capable of returning fire at a sniper, unlike a surface vessel. If the sniper targets a nuclear powered submarine armed with intercontinental ballistic missiles, what is the submarine's crew going to do? Launch a nuclear missile at the sniper? In this case, the nuclear powered and nuclear armed submarine, perhaps the most destructive weapon on the planet, is completely helpless as its weapons systems are utterly inappropriate for the threat. The submarine might be able to turn Moscow into a radiated parking lot, but it cannot touch the lone gunman with a bolt-action rifle.

More importantly to the sniper, because a submarine operates underwater, its hull must remain intact in order to submerge. A ship can sustain quite a bit of damage before it sinks, but a submarine, in comparison, is relatively fragile. Just a single armor piercing round shot through the hull of a submarine will make it unseaworthy. Different parts of a submarine are vulnerable to the sniper depending on what the sub is doing and where it is. A submarine setting out from or heading to the docks will most likely have little exposed except for its sail. However, the sail is an important part of the vessel because, depending on the model of submarine, it may house a conning tower (which has communications equipment), a periscope, and radar and antenna masts. Also, the submarine's commander or senior staff may occupy the sail and expose themselves in order to observe the surrounding terrain. Consequently, several carefully placed rounds from a sniper could result in the death of the vessel's captain and the disabling of its long range communications equipment.

If a submarine can be targeted while it is docked, then more of the vessel is visible. Not only can the sail be targeted, but shots can be directed against the entire upper half of the submarine. If a sub is in dry-dock and completely out of the water, then an informed shooter can target every part of the submarine to include its propulsion system and sensitive sonar equipment. For about $50 worth of 20 mm armor piercing incendiary rounds, a lone gunman can easily disable a $2 billion Virginia-class attack submarine, forcing it to stay off the high seas until repaired.

Other Uses of the Heavy Caliber Sniper Rifle

We have discussed briefly some of the major targets a sniper armed with a heavy caliber rifle could effectively target such as tanks, armored vehicles, aircraft, ships, and submarines. But the list does not stop there as there are an almost endless number of objects or structures that could be targeted by a thoughtful sniper. For example, Time Magazine carried an article in the June 20, 2005, edition by Mark Thompson, detailing how .50 caliber rifles could be used to target and penetrate the armored security towers that protect nuclear power plants. Once terrorist marksmen used the big rifles to take out the security guards sitting in their guard towers - or iron coffins as they are cynically termed - other members of the assault force would be free to breach the protective walls of the nuclear facility with explosively rigged platter charges. Once inside the reactor control room, the terrorists' goal would be to cause a nuclear meltdown. Engineers in the nuclear power industry agree it would not be terribly difficult to manipulate the controls to shut off the various pumps and valves that supply the water that keeps the reactor cool. The result: nuclear meltdown.

Barrett XM-109 25 mm Rifle

This 25 mm anti-material rifle is relatively light in weight and has a range of 3000 meters. The XM -109 can take out the full spectrum of targets: planes, helicopters, ships, tanks, armored cars, and anything in between.

True, nuclear power plants are one possible target for gun-toting terrorists. However, various security analysts, gun control advocates, and sniping experts have determined there are an endless number of targets for the large caliber rifle like:

- Large gatherings of people at sporting events, such as at open football or baseball stadiums, where a sniper could shoot into the crowds from a mile away and kill dozens of people in order to spread terror.
- Above ground liquefied natural gas (LNG) storage containers, to include the ships and trucks transporting the LNG from large processing centers to local distributors, could be targeted, resulting in a large explosion.
- Bulk fuel tanks located at oil refineries and ports, fuel trucks and fuel transportation ships could all be set on fire
- Chemical manufactures could be fired on in hopes of creating a Bhopal, India-like catastrophe, where a Union Carbide container overheated in 1984 and released 27 tons of the pesticide methyl isocyanate (MIC) into the surrounding densely populated urban area, killing over 20,000 people and injuring a further 120,000; also trucks or trains transporting chlorine and propane gas could be likewise targeted and blown up.
- Armored cars transporting money for banks can be taken out to facilitate robbing them.

In short, a large array of targets are available in any society that, when hit with a large caliber, armor piercing, incendiary bullet could cause major explosions, the release of deadly chemical and gases into the surrounding population, or large scale fires. These resulting secondary effects can shut down major transportation arteries, result in the evacuation of tens of thousands of people, may cause death and injuries to hundreds of thousands of people in the right conditions, can cost a government millions, if not billions of dollars, in repairs, clean-up costs, insurance pay outs, medical care, and can paralyze a population with fear of another catastrophe. Thus, any insurgent or terrorist organization could wreak varying degrees of havoc on an unprotected and unprepared urban center and population.

While I agree that an educated sniper firing the proper ammunition at a defined target can wreak damage on the urban infrastructure, we should not overestimate the heavy caliber sniper rifle and think a gunman armed with a .50 caliber sniper rifle can shut down an entire city. That is pure nonsense. For instance, one of the most commonly recognized targets for a terrorist armed with a .50 caliber rifle is a fuel facility. For sure, a few well-placed armor piercing incendiary rounds will penetrate the thin metal of a fuel container and then catch on fire but, will this fire result in an apocalyptic disaster where multiple fuel containers explode and spread burning fuel for miles in all directions? Some experts think not.

In the first part of June 2007, the Associated Press ran an article stating: "Federal authorities announced Saturday they had broken up a suspected Muslim terrorist cell planning a "chilling" attack to destroy John F. Kennedy International Airport, kill thousands of people and trigger an economic catastrophe by blowing up a jet fuel artery that runs through populous residential neighborhoods." According to authorities, these terrorists intended to blow up the airport fuel tanks with explosives, but they could just have easily – and probably with more success – had set them alight with a heavy caliber sniper rifle firing incendiary ammunition.

While a fuel tank or two might catch on fire, some people knowledgeable in the field thought the damage would be limited. "Richard Kuprewicz, a pipeline expert and president of Accufacts Inc., an energy consulting firm that focuses on pipelines and tank farms, said the force of explosion would depend on the amount of fuel under pressure, but it would not travel up and down the line. 'That doesn't mean wackos out there can't do damage and cause a fire, but those explosions and fires are going to be fairly restricted,' he said." In this situation, the company that manages JFK Airport's fuel network felt a simplistic attack, like starting a fire at their fuel farm with a sniper rifle, would be contained rather quickly.

This Blackwater security detail, protecting a State Department member, would be unable to stop a sniper firing a large caliber rifle, which would penetrate their body armor and their armored vehicle.

Protective Security Details

Another area of concern for security professionals is less horrific than the awful death of thousands caused by chemical poisoning or an uncontrollable gasoline fire. What they fear is their inability to protect a high value personality, like a head of state, from a sniper armed with a heavy caliber rifle. Don Edwards, a career Secret Service officer, wrote a National Defense University thesis about such a threat. In his thesis Edwards laconically summarizes, “There is an historical precedent for the use of large caliber weapons against individual personnel targets. Technology has greatly enhanced the range and lethality of man portable large caliber weapons. The author feels this coupled with widespread availability could result in the use of these weapons against U.S. National Command Authority (NCA) figures.” Edwards also recognized, “These weapons could be employed effectively from places of concealment outside the scope of normal security measures against personnel, aircraft, lightly armored vehicles, and buildings. They are more accurate than shoulder fired rockets and immune to electronic counter measures. They thus pose a threat in environments generally thought secure."

In other words, the job of security details have gotten harder. Security measures that would normally work for the person they are trying to protect will not work against a heavy caliber rifle fired at extreme ranges. For instance, an armored car or limousine will not stop a 20 mm armor piercing round. A shooter will be able to fire through an armored car door or bulletproof window, penetrate the vehicle, and continue on to strike the target. Furthermore, a sniper can hit and disable the vehicle's engine, making it a sitting duck for follow on shots.

With big sniper rifles, body armor becomes irrelevant. A .50 caliber sniper rifle firing armor piercing ammunition will go through the front ceramic plate of body armor, go through the person wearing it, go out through the back plate of ceramic armor, and then drill the person being protected. So, a bodyguard placing themselves in front of a sniper's bullet will not protect the target. Also, a shooter can penetrate other protective mediums found in structures like windows, doors, walls (concrete and plaster), and roofs. Not only will a large bullet penetrate these mediums, but there may also be little or no deflection to throw the shot off the intended target.

A shooter firing from an extremely far distance will most likely be able to get a shot off before they are detected by even alert counter-sniper teams. Since an urban area allows for a concealed sniper to fire from a thousand possible locations, security details are easily overcome by so much urban clutter and information overload. It could take hundreds of men to truly protect a dignitary from the threat of a sniper in a densely populated urban area. This massive effort would require security personnel to identify, observe, and be able to counter every potential sniper hide within a one-mile radius of a particular location. Additionally, the extreme range a .50 caliber sniper rifle could be fired from would negate most counter-sniper technology, which is only effective at relatively close distances of 500 meters or less.

Guerillas and Heavy Caliber Sniper Rifles

Since we know heavy caliber sniper rifles have been commercially available at least from the early 1980’s, have any guerrilla organization used them in combat operations? The Violence Policy Center (VPC) reported that several people admitted at least twenty-five Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifles made their way into the hands of the mujahideen fighting against the Russians in Afghanistan. In the VPC’s report, Voting from the Rooftops, they state, “Associated Press wire service also described the transaction as follows, quoting the president of Barrett Firearms, Ronnie G. Barrett: Ronnie Barrett, president of Murfreesboro, Tenn.-Barrett Firearms, likened sale of the .50-caliber armor-piercing rifles to the supply of the Stinger surface-to-air missiles given to anti-Soviet guerrillas in Afghanistan.

“Barrett rifles were picked up by U.S. government trucks, shipped to U.S. government bases and shipped to those Afghan freedom fighters,” Barrett said. There is a kernel of truth in these well-parsed representations. The U.S. government did in fact supply some Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifles to the Afghan resistance. It just did not supply or authorize the ones bought by Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda. “We never sold anything to, or bought anything, or otherwise transferred anything to bin Laden in the 80s,” according to the man who ran the program on the ground—the former CIA station chief in Pakistan.” While Al-Qaeda might very well have U.S. produced .50 caliber sniper rifles, they could just as easily have bought similar weapons from a dozen other countries through illegal arms dealers and their own clandestine intermediaries.

Steyr HS .50

These were bought by Iran and smuggled into Iraq.

The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)

The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) received several hundred .50 caliber rifles in the late 1990s for their war against Serbia. The man instrumental in getting the KLA their weapons was a gunrunner by the name of Florin Krasniqi. Krasniqi, an Albanian by birth, entered the United States illegally in 1989, smuggled across the Mexican border in the trunk of a car. When war came to Kosovo in 1998, Krasniqi was ready and willing to help the KLA by shipping them weapons. It was easy. Krasniqi, who lives in Brooklyn, New York, noted, “Anything you need to run a small guerrilla army, you can buy here in America. You have all the guns you need here to fight a war. M-16s. That’s what the U.S. soldiers carry in Iraq. All the rifles which U.S. soldiers use in every war, you can buy them in a gun store or a gun show. By far, the weapon of choice was a .50-caliber rifle. You could kill a man from over a mile away. You can dismantle a vehicle from a mile away.”

It was easy for Krasniqi to go out and buy any weapon he needed from private arms dealers at local gun shows. All he needed was a credit card and a clean criminal record and he could buy as many guns as he wanted, no questions asked. Krasniqi eventually had several other people, who lived in different parts of the country, buy guns for him, thus reducing his signature. Then, they flew the guns to his native Albania on commercial flights. All they did was officially declare the weapons as hunting rifles and the airlines allowed them to ship the weapons with the rest of the regular baggage.

Krasniqi's team of gunrunners never had a problem getting the guns out of the United States. But, they often had to switch flights in Switzerland and the authorities there wanted to know what they were doing with such powerful weapons. So, Krasniqi told them they were going elephant hunting. The Swiss officials were skeptical because there were no elephants in Albania. Krasniqi told them they belonged to a hunting club in Albania which organized trips to Tanzania. Eventually, Krasniqi actually bought an elephant in Tanzania for $10,000.00, which he never saw, to prove they were elephant hunters. The ruse worked because they continued to fly their weapons from the United States, through Switzerland, and onto Albania.

The KLA had a voracious appetite for .50 caliber rifles, so sending out the big guns in two's and three's was too slow a process. Former Newsweek correspondent Stacy Sullivan, author of Be Not Afraid, For You Have Sons in America, a book about Krasniqi, described how Krasniqi clandestinely increased the flow of rifles without getting caught by American authorities. The trickle of rifles became a flood with one hundred being flown out at once. All Krasniqi did was move the rifles by truck to John F. Kennedy airport in New York City and conceal the weapons with legitimate humanitarian goods like food and clothes. The pallets filled with the rifles were never inspected or x-rayed. The airport simply did not have the manpower to check everything being shipped overseas, and unless there was some indication of impropriety, anything could get shipped out, to include anti-tank guns.

The KLA got their .50 caliber rifles in standard guerrilla fashion. They had a front man (Krasniqi) with a clean record buy the weapons legally in a country with liberal gun laws (the United States). The organization then shipped these weapons via commercial air, used a simple cover story to explain why they were shipping the big guns (for a hunting club), and then off-loaded the weapons in Albania. Then, the KLA moved the guns from Albania into Kosovo through illegal border crossings. Since Kosovo was populated mainly by ethnic Albanians, the Albanian government never looked too closely at their border and the activities of possible gunrunners.

An Iranian sniper fires a Steyr HS .50 on the range.

Iraqi Insurgents

In 2005, the National Iranian Police legally purchased eight hundred HS50 .50 caliber sniper rifles from the Austrian weapons manufacturer Steyr-Mannlicher. Iran’s given reason for buying these weapons was for use against drug smugglers on the dangerous Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan border, where a bloody drug war raged for several years. Steyr-Mannlicher did nothing illegal since the Austrian government approved the transaction. The Iranians even provided an end-user certificate, proving they would not export these weapons to another country. The rifles were subsequently shipped to Iran in 2006.

The Steyr Arms web page describes their precision crafted sniper rifle, “The STEYR HS .50 is a long range, high precision rifle, with an effective range of up to 1,640 yards (1,500 m). It was designed as a single shot bolt action rifle and is available in the caliber .50 BMG. The STEYR HS .50 features a cold hammer forged fluted barrel, adjustable bi-pod, and a highly efficient muzzle brake, which reduces recoil substantially to increase shooting comfort. The top mounted

Picatinny rail (Mil. Std. 1913 rail) allows quick and easy installation of various optics, or night vision devices. The STEYR HS .50 is designed to field strip easily for transportation or maintenance purposes."

If Steyr sold these sniper rifles to any other country, the transaction would have been quickly forgotten. However, since Iran supported various insurgent groups in Iraq, American and British observers of this transaction thought it was unwise to give Iran such powerful weapons. America and Britain raised the most opposition to the arms sale because it was their soldiers on the ground fighting the Iranian-equipped insurgents. Soon, these fears came true because, according to the Britain's Telegraph, just forty-five days after the arms transfer, an American officer was shot dead while in an up-armored Humvee. A .50 caliber round punched through the two-inch thick bulletproof windshield and then struck the unlucky soldier. Since the Steyr-Iran transaction, more than a hundred HS50s were found by U.S. forces during raids of insurgent arms caches.

Of course, Iran denied giving the weapons to the Iraqi insurgents. Most likely, Iran removed the serial numbers from the HS50s so they could not be traced and so Iran could at least have a thin veil of plausible deniability. This sanitizing would take some work since Steyr places the weapon's serial number on the bolt, the barrel, and the frame (in order to ensure these precision crafted pieces are kept together). Even if it could be proven the rifles came from the 2005 transaction with Steyr, Iran could still deny any official involvement.

Tehran could claim the weapons were stolen from their National Police or corrupt members of the National Police sold them to Iraqi insurgents without any approval from the Iranian government. Because Iran had a sophisticated covert warfare ability and much experience secretly aiding Iraq's insurgents with Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFPs), one seriously doubts Iran would have supplied these HS50 sniper rifles in such a manner that they could be traced back to Tehran. To date no one has been able to provide a serial number trace of the captured weapons to Steyr-Mannlicher. Steyr-Mannlicher noted their HS50 licensing rights have expired so the rifle can also be built elsewhere, like Canada.

Heavy Caliber Rifles in Action

Even though the destructive potential for heavy caliber rifles in an urban guerrilla war is immense, how come they are not being used? Al-Qaeda has more than a couple Barrett .50 caliber rifles in Afghanistan, so where are the NATO armored cars being shot up in Kabul and elsewhere? Only one IRA team successfully used a .50 caliber sniping rifle in their operations against the British. The KLA had several hundred .50 caliber sniper rifles, but where were the reports of Serbian helicopters, fuel dumps, and vehicles being shot up? The Iraqi insurgents had at least one hundred HS50 sniper rifles but only managed to shoot a single soldier with them.

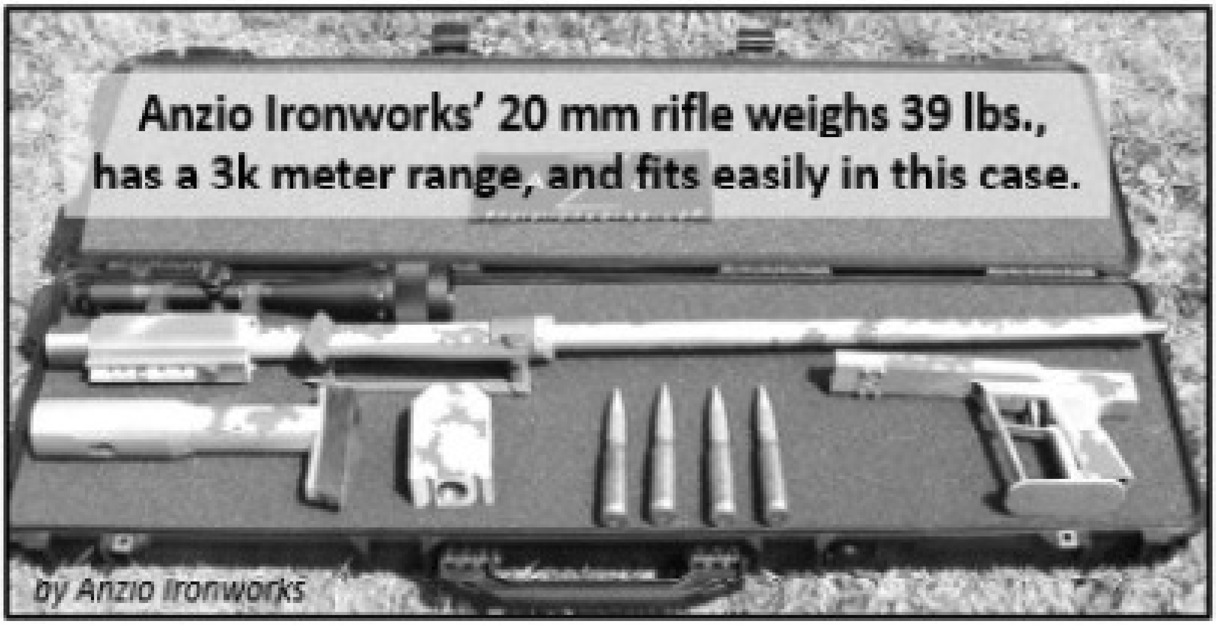
What about the juicy, lucrative targets all over the world from naval bases to commercial airports? A Rand study of attacks on military airfields from 1940-1992 failed to reveal a single attack by heavy caliber sniper rifles. Although small, unconventional forces using unsophisticated weapons have successfully destroyed or damaged over 2000 aircraft, the much-hyped sniper rifle has resulted in zero destroyed aircraft.

The Rand study on LAX noted, “since 1980, there have been over 8,000 terrorist attacks against aviation targets worldwide, killing over 5,000 people. Since 1974, LAX has been the target of two bombings, two attempted bombings, and one gun attack.”

The only example of anyone having used a heavy caliber rifle to destroy aircraft was the

American Marine Second Raider Battalion in World War II, which managed to shoot up two Japanese sea planes moored in the water off Makin Island with a Boys .55 caliber anti-tank rifle.

Finally, heavy caliber sniper rifles make the life of the guerrilla difficult. Despite the modern advancements in rifle design, a .50 caliber rifle is still cumbersome compared to something like a .44 magnum revolver. It is harder to transport a large rifle clandestinely, it is harder to set one up for firing while remaining undetected, it is harder to fire a .50 caliber beast and conceal its gunshot and muzzle flash, and it is harder to flee the scene of shooting with a thirty pound hunk of steel. I am not saying a guerrilla organization cannot use a large rifle covertly, it is just much more difficult. It takes a sophisticated, disciplined, well organized organization to acquire, transport, set up, fire, and then escape with a large weapon. Sloppy, immature organizations will fail at such a task. Only top-notch organizations can pull off such a feat repeatedly, professionally, and securely, like the IRA, and they were eventually caught.


Anzio Ironworks' 20 mm rifle weighs 39 lbs.,
has a 3k meter range, and fits easily in this case.
by Anzio Ironworks

Heavy caliber sniper rifles have great potential as an anti-material tool. They can take out enormous weapon systems like battleships and submarines, planes and helicopters, they can cause severe damage to civilian infrastructure like fuel farms, chemical plants, tankers, airports, and naval facilities, and they can render most security details for dignitaries irrelevant. However, an organization, be it a conventional military unit or a guerrilla movement, must educate themselves about the limitations and strengths of the big rifles before they can have any success with them. To date, most guerrilla movements have failed to appreciate the heavy caliber sniper rifle and have thus failed to develop the organizational infrastructure required to clandestinely and securely employ these weapons.

Chapter 8

Countering the Urban Sniper

The third general type of sniper is the armed irregular. He may have little or no formal military training but may have much experience in urban combat. He may or may not wear any distinguishing uniform and may even strive to appear to be merely another of thousands of noncombatants found in a large urban area. He may or may not carry his weapon openly and may go to great lengths to avoid identification as a sniper.

- FM-91-10-1, An Infantry Guide to Combat In Built-Up Areas, Appendix J, Countering Urban Snipers

No Easy Answer

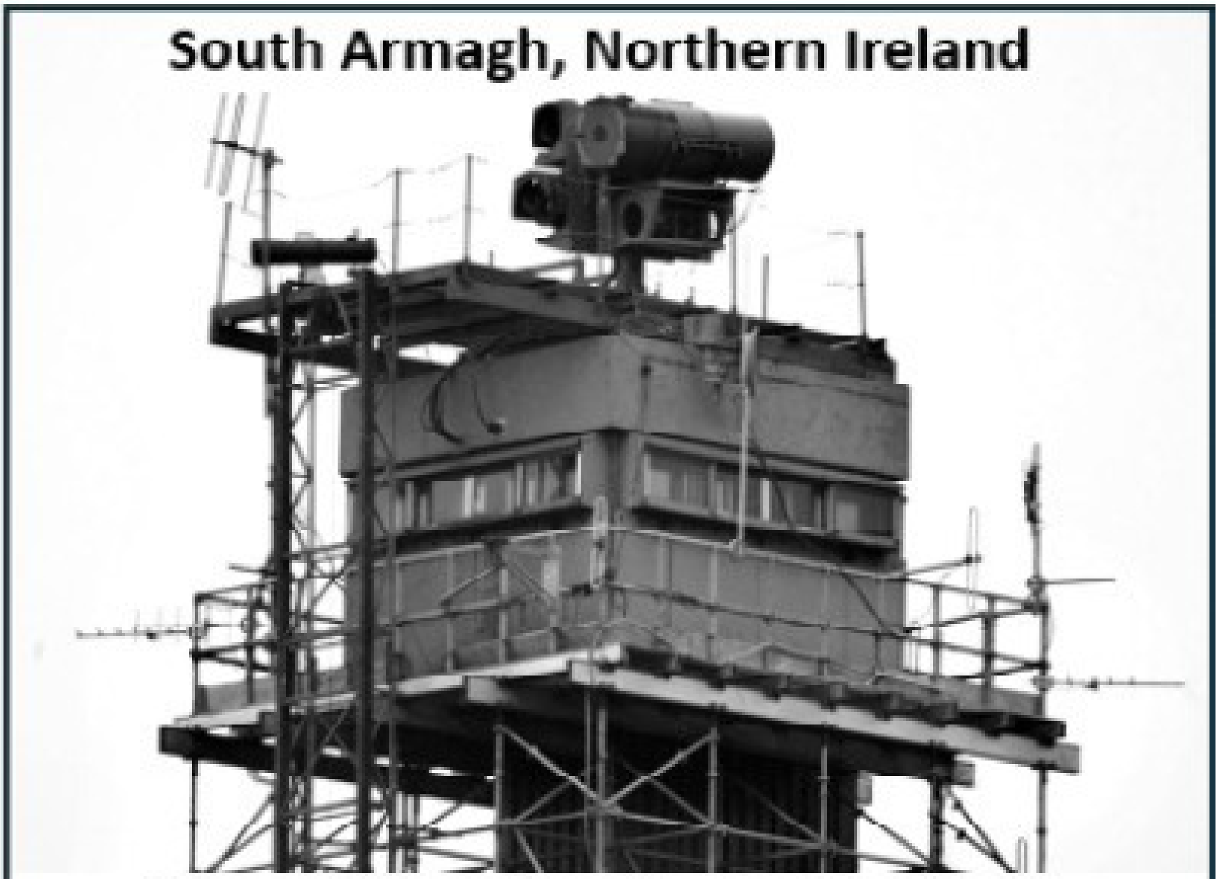
There is no simple solution for the problem presented by the urban guerrilla sniper. What works in one situation, environment, or time period may not work in another. Importantly, a security force or population will remain vulnerable to attack, no matter what they do, if they are ignorant of guerrilla sniper methodology. Ultimately, the only way to defeat or limit the guerrilla sniper is to study and understand them.

Checkpoints and Guard Towers

Any uniformed soldier or police officer is a potential target for a guerrilla sniper. Security personnel are a target by the mere fact they wear a uniform identifying who they are. And due to the very activities uniformed police and soldiers have to perform, such as walking patrols and manning checkpoints, they are doubly vulnerable. The urban environment is so complex, security forces have no hope of eliminating all potential threats. However, the probability of effective sniper attacks can be significantly reduced.

First, let us tackle the problem of static security positions like checkpoints and guard towers. Any uniformed person who stands in the same spot, in the open, day after day, is vulnerable to sniper attack. The Juba sniper video, as we studied in a previous chapter, reveals that static security positions are quite vulnerable. It does not matter if the soldier is sticking their head out of the hatch of a tank or standing in an open guard tower – they are victims waiting to happen. If a uniformed soldier has to man a static position, they must protect themselves using either cover or concealment. To defeat the threat of PLO snipers, the Israelis built sniper-proof surveillance towers which they used to monitor the surrounding terrain. These towers were completely enclosed with bullet-proof glass and other bullet proof materials like steel and concrete. From these towers, Israeli soldiers could look out, but no bullets could get in. A completely bullet-proof structure is one way to protect a static guard post.

South Armagh, Northern Ireland



This surveillance tower is sniper-proof but is it drone-proof too?

Another technique is to construct a guard post that completely conceals anyone inside. For example, a guard tower can be covered with heavy camouflage netting so the people inside can see and shoot out, but snipers cannot see in. Urban counter-snipers used a similar technique for years. When a counter-sniper team is required to fire from inside a building, they hang sheer netting from the ceiling to the floor, covering a window or open area they want to shoot from. From a distance, this netting looks like a solid wall. The snipers, who are close to the netting, can see and shoot through it.

A variation of the netting method is using a solid material, like sheets, to conceal oneself from a sniper. After John Mohammad and Lee Malvo began killing people in the DC area, local gas stations hung bed sheets around their gas pumps. This way, customers could drive up to a gas station, pass through a wall of bed sheets, and then stop next to a gas pump, while they were surrounded by the sheets. Of course, these sheets would not stop a bullet, but they did not have to since they concealed everything behind them. Hitting anyone behind the wall of sheets would be a matter of pure luck.

Security forces establishing temporary checkpoints on roads can use this same methodology. These checkpoint teams can bring with them, on each patrol, camouflage netting and the material necessary for hanging them. When they get to their location, they hang the netting around their position. In this manner, the cars and people to be searched enter a completely enclosed and camouflaged position, effectively isolating them from observation from a sniper. After the cars and people are searched or questioned, they exit the enclosed checkpoint and go back into the open and on their way.

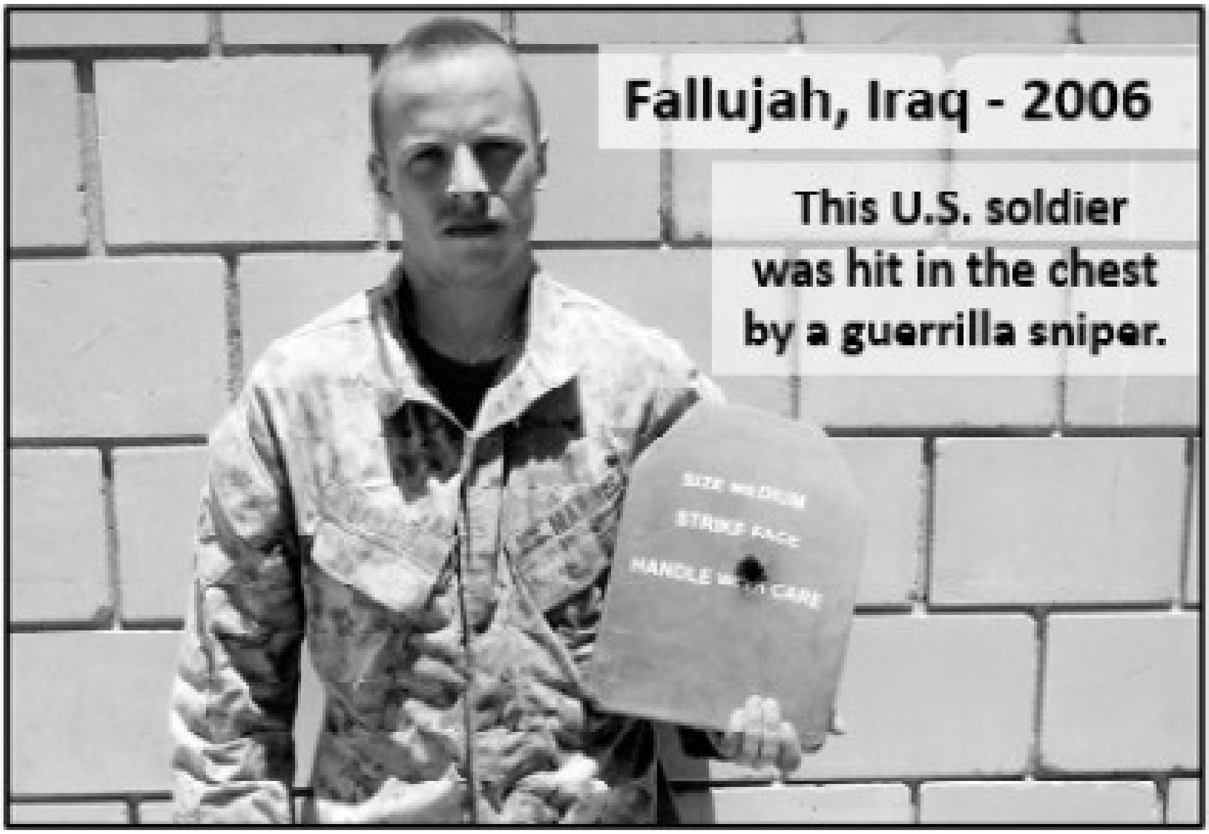
Body Armor

Body armor is another defensive measure that saves lives and makes a snipers job harder. However, the capabilities and limitations of the body armor worn must be taken into consideration. For example, soft body armor, commonly worn by police officers, only stops bullets fired from pistols. Level IIIA soft body armor, which is standard issue for most police departments, will stop up to a .44 magnum pistol round, but nothing larger. In order for a person to be protected from a rifle round, they must wear hard armor made either of a steel or ceramic plate. Level IV hard body armor is designed to stop six 7.62 mm rifle rounds and still protect the wearer.

A soldier can also wear a protective helmet, but even the most modern Kevlar helmets will only stop a 9 mm pistol round because they only provide Level IIIA, not Level IV protection. Consequently, a 5.56 mm rifle round will go clean through a Kevlar helmet. A soldier wearing a protective helmet can only hope it will deflect an imperfectly aimed incoming rifle round because the helmet will not stop a dead on shot. Even Level IV body armor can be defeated with armor piercing ammunition or weapons like the big .50 caliber guns, so they should not be relied on to stop a sniper. To be sure, body armor makes a sniper’s job more difficult because they will most likely be forced to shoot around the armor, at a much smaller body part, like the pelvis or head.

Foot Patrols

Soldiers conducting foot patrols in the open are less vulnerable than those conducting static checkpoints because they are moving. A checkpoint can be studied for days on end to engineer the perfect attack. In contrast, a foot patrol is a dynamic element able to take different routes every day and change their course at any moment to thwart ambush. However, foot patrols are still targeted by urban snipers simply because they are in the open. If a patrol takes the same route every day, they too are setting a pattern that can be studied and exploited by a patient shooter. The sniper’s job may be more difficult and require a more flexible plan of attack, but some snipers prefer a moving target when the urban terrain works in their favor.



Fallujah, Iraq - 2006

This U.S. soldier was hit in the chest by a guerrilla sniper.

As discussed previously, British foot patrols in Northern Ireland were favorite targets for IRA snipers. IRA sniper teams would observe an approaching British patrol with a system of lookouts that included school-age children and housewives. From the information received from the lookouts, the sniper team could predict the patrol's route. The sniper team would set up in a location to ambush the patrol at an intersection. Patrols were at a disadvantage when crossing an intersection because a shot could come from any direction.

In response, British patrols routinely ran through intersections so a waiting sniper would have a fleeting target. They also developed techniques where they covered all avenues of approach leading into an intersection so if a sniper took a shot, someone was bound to see it. The British also used multiple patrols, working together, to thwart snipers. The idea was one element would move while another element provided cover from an elevated position like the roof of a building. Then, the teams switched duties and the first element provided cover while the other team moved. These sniper-savvy tactics were designed to defeat a sniper attack before it even happened because, if an IRA sniper saw a patrol employing effective counter-sniper tactics, they preferred to target a different, less vigilant patrol.

Preventative Measures

People who operate in the open can limit their exposure in other ways. Since we know snipers key in on lucrative targets like officers, radio operators, forward observers, close air support controllers, and other snipers, these people must conceal their identities from potential snipers. For instance, officers should not wear rank visible from a distance, superiors should not be saluted in the open (this is what soldiers call a “sniper check”), and people should not give deference to their leaders in any manner detectable from a distance. Because, as a sniper searches for potential targets, they will look at body language, like standing at attention for a superior, to identify a person of rank.

Other key people, like radio operators, must conceal their radios and their duties. A communicator walking in the open with a radio on their back and an antenna sticking into the air is a dead man if a sniper sees him. Radio operators should conceal their radios in daypacks and use non-traditional modes of communication as opposed to their long-whip antennas. Communicators should consider weaving flexible whip or coax cable antennas into their gear or consider using more concealable means of communications like walkie-talkies, cell, and satellite phones. Or, while on patrol, a communicator can move into a structure or an alley during a security halt, pull out their gear, and then make their communication in a covert manner.

The goal for soldiers operating in the open is concealment of information: to hide their rank, specific duties, and any special equipment or weapons to deny potential snipers an easy time of picking their targets. Ideally, everyone in a patrol should look as uniform as possible so no single person sticks out as more important than another. The patrol should start to act more like the guerrillas they are fighting, so the waiting sniper has a difficult time identifying who is who and who does what.

There are many commercially available undercover equipment rigs for sale designed to be worn under a jacket to conceal ammunition, weapons, and equipment like radios. A unit can still conceal their equipment and weapons on their person yet adhere to the laws of land warfare. This is a difficult thing to do for conventional military and police units because they are used to operating overtly, in either rural terrain (like the military) or in permissive, relatively peaceful environments (like the police). Units should consider training their men to change their rank oriented, overt cultures to deny snipers a unit-paralyzing shot.

Warnings for Soldiers and the Populace

In the chaotic world of the modern battlefield, nothing can be taken for granted. It only makes sense military units, policemen, and concerned citizens try to warn others of the threat of enemy snipers. In World War II, all sides posted sniper warning signs, cautioning their own soldiers of the presence of enemy snipers as if they were warning people of “Falling Rocks” or “Bridge Ices Before Road.” This is because soldiers working a specific trench or neighborhood knew the threats in their area but, soldiers from rear supply units or from other organizations were oblivious to the threat of enemy snipers unless someone told them. In a business where ignorance can be a death sentence, it paid to inform your comrades. In Stalingrad, for example, both Germans and Russians put up warning signs, informing their men of particularly dangerous areas of the city.

The INKAS Sentry APC provides protection up to 7.62 mm NATO ball ammunition.

While the IRA put up their infamous Sniper At Work signs in Northern Ireland to intimidate British patrols, the signs also served to warn both the enemy and fellow citizens a guerrilla sniper team was working in the area. In Beirut, during the civil war from 1975-1990, local radio stations announced the latest sniper activity to the city residents, cautioning them on where to go and not to go, like they were passing along a traffic report. This public courtesy allowed the various people living in the war torn city to buy their groceries, get gas, and visit relatives without taking a bullet along the way. The same was true of the besieged city of Sarajevo where the locals posted Pazi Snajper! signs in order to warn uninformed citizens they were approaching Sniper’s Alley or some other hazardous killing zone.

Vehicles

People traveling in vehicles may be less vulnerable to a sniper attack because of the protection provided by the vehicle and the fact they are moving. Conversely, in some cases, people in a vehicle may actually be more vulnerable to a sniper because they are a bigger target. Certainly, a regular, unarmored vehicle creates problems for a shooter. A car’s windshield is thick and may deflect a bullet. Also, shooting through a car door may deflect and fragment a bullet, depending on the type of round fired and the weapon used. As a result, precision shooting through a car adds difficulties for the sniper.

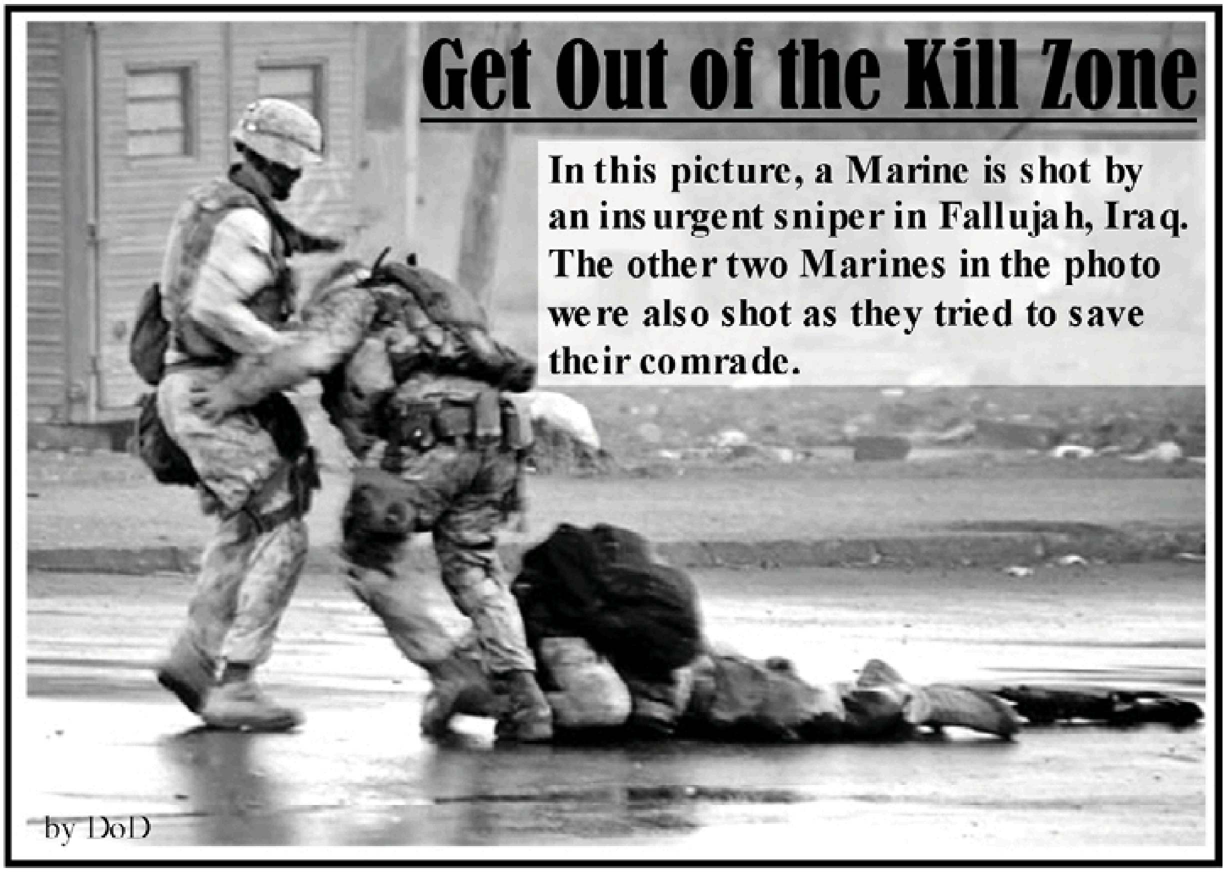
However, a trained sniper can still shoot through a vehicle and hit their target. For instance, President Kennedy was shot in the throat by a high-velocity bullet that first went through the front windshield, was deflected downwards due to the angle of the glass, and then found its mark. Snipers can also anticipate the negative effects of shooting through a vehicle by employing large caliber weapons that will go through a car door or windshield with little deflection. For example, a .50 caliber sniper rifle will penetrate a car door, a windshield, and a car seat.

If a person is concerned with using a vehicle for protection from sniper attacks, they need an armored car with bulletproof glass and armor-plated doors. An armored vehicle can take many forms such as a regular car, like a Mercedes or BMW, modified to protect its occupants while appearing to be normal from the outside. Or, overtly armored cars can be used. The British police in Northern Ireland routinely drove armored Land Rovers for protection. In other wars, like those in Iraq and Chechnya, the conventional military forces employed heavily armored fighting vehicles like armored trucks, armored personnel carriers, and tanks. We should remember guerrilla snipers in Iraq, on one occasion, shot through the two-inch thick armored windshield of an American armored truck with a .50 caliber sniper rifle, hitting a soldier inside.

A person who rides in an armored vehicle, but exposes themselves outside the vehicle, are still vulnerable to attack. As mentioned previously, during the battle for Stalingrad, one of the greatest threats to German panzers was Russian snipers. Targeting an armored vehicle is an inherently effective technique for a sniper because the only person in the crew who has a chance to see where the shot came from is already dead. Consequently, despite a tank’s massive firepower, they are relatively toothless when a careless crew member exposes themselves to a sniper.

Military organizations thus face the challenge of manufacturing armored vehicles that allow crew members to observe their surroundings without exposing themselves to snipers. Civilian armored cars, with a normal complement of windows, allow observation in all directions giving the occupants good situational awareness. One armored vehicle, produced by South Africa, the RG-31 Cougar, has a balance between good armor and good observation because the vehicle has bullet-proof windows and gun ports allowing observation in all directions.

Another dilemma faced by soldiers traveling in vehicles is they need to defend themselves against more than just snipers. They have to defend themselves against RPG attacks, roadside bombs, complex ambushes, and the like. Vehicles like the American Humvee employ a roof-mounted gunner as protection, but this leaves the gunner exposed to snipers. Newer versions of the Humvee have remotely controlled gun systems on the roof enabling the crew to return fire in all directions without anyone exposing themselves to enemy fire. A downside to this new Humvee is the occupants are crammed inside their claustrophobic truck so they have less situational awareness. A vehicle like this may be more secure from sniper attack but is more vulnerable to other threats like IEDs and RPGs. An effective vehicle must balance protection from both snipers and other more lethal threats.


Get Out of the Kill Zone
In this picture, a Marine is shot by an insurgent sniper in Fallujah, Iraq. The other two Marines in the photo were also shot as they tried to save their comrade.
by DoD

Get Out of the Kill Zone

When a person comes under fire by a sniper, they must take immediate action to reduce their vulnerability. The first thing a person under fire should do is take cover. For instance, a single individual can get off the street and into an armored vehicle. A squad of soldiers can seek cover in a nearby building. It is of the utmost importance that the targeted person or persons leave the immediate area and get out of the sniper's line of fire. Since a sniper usually establishes a position allowing them to focus on a specific location, moving out of the sniper's kill zone may be all it takes. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule and we must remember Charles Whitman was able to shoot people in all directions from atop the Texas Tower. In that case, some of Whitman's victims thought they were moving to a safer area when in fact they were only exposing themselves more.

Immediate action drills must take into account a member of a patrol may be shot with the sniper's first bullet. So, as a group of men react to the sniper’s first shot and find cover, a member of the team may be caught in the open because they are dead or wounded. In fact, a sniper may intentionally wound a patrol member to lure other members out and into the open who are in turn shot. A common method of dealing with this problem is the use of hand thrown smoke grenades to block a sniper’s view of their target. If a member of a patrol is shot by a sniper, their teammates take cover, throw smoke grenades to obscure the sniper’s field of vision, and then rescue their wounded mate while under the cover of smoke. The smoke is not bullet-proof, but it is the equivalent of hanging bed sheets around a gas pump – a sniper would have to get lucky to make a shot through the smoke in order to hit someone.

Battlefield Detectives

Once the targeted persons react to the initial sniper attack, they must become battlefield detectives. The first thing battlefield detectives do is determine from what direction the sniper fired from. The direction may be determined from a combination of things to include: the sound of the gunshot, observable muzzle blast/flash, and the impact of the bullet itself. Once the direction is determined, the distance to the sniper is estimated. This can also be deduced from a variety of clues like the time between hearing the supersonic crack of the bullet and hearing the actual gunshot, the force of impact of the bullet, and likely places the sniper could be hiding in.

If a person sees the bullet’s impact and hears the gunshot simultaneously, then the sniper is probably 300 meters or closer. If a person sees the bullet impact first (or hears the supersonic crack first) and then the gunshot, the shooter is further away, maybe 500 meters or more. Trying to determine the sniper’s distance from sound alone creates problems because so many variations come into play. What speed is the bullet traveling? What is the speed of sound at your location and elevation? Is the sniper using a suppressor or subsonic ammunition?

Another important element for determining the sniper’s direction and distance is the angle of the bullet. A bullet striking at a severe angle must have been fired from a tall structure, while a bullet striking the target at a perpendicular angle must have been fired from a street level position. A common method of backtracking the azimuth of a shot is to stick a weapon cleaning rod in a hole made by the bullet and see where the rod points. In Stalingrad, Vassili Zaitsev would hold up a helmet or mitten with a board to get enemy snipers to shoot through it. Once they shot the board, Vassili held the board up and looked back through the hole and directly at where the shot came from.

After evaluating the probable direction, distance, and angle the shot was made from, the battlefield detective makes an educated guess where the sniper is located. Once a location is determined, the targeted persons evaluate the assets available to them and choose a course of action based on the environment they are operating in. If the security forces are operating in an environment of extreme restraint, such as the British in Northern Ireland or American law-enforcement in the United States, then the targeted persons have limited options.

An acceptable response would be surrounding the suspected sniper to capture them as they flee or to kill the gunman up close to limit collateral damage. If security forces succeed in surrounding the sniper, they still must identify the suspected shooter. This requires them to separate the guilty party from the surrounding innocent people. The responding security forces can only do this if they have the proper tools like gunshot residue detection kits, dogs trained in detecting gunpowder, and the ability to effectively question potential eyewitnesses to gather incriminating testimony.

Aachen, Germany (1944)
Where did the German sniper fire from?

The Importance of Restraint

Soldiers and police fighting a guerrilla war must understand restraint and thorough investigations are the best ways to defeat the urban guerrilla sniper. This is especially true when a sniper fires from a populated area to get an overreaction from security forces. The sniper wants the security forces to respond with artillery barrages, air strikes, and tank shells so they kill innocent civilians and destroy their own city. Every time security forces overreact with massive firepower, they provide prime propaganda for the guerrillas' cause, alienate the people from the government, and increase the costs of repairing their own city.

What the guerrilla sniper fears most is an educated response backed up with a relentless investigation into the shooting. A guerrilla wants their victims to shoot at everything around them that moves. This kind of emotional, knee-jerk reaction makes their job easier. In contrast, a trained, disciplined, educated patrol will quickly take cover and analyze the impact of the bullet to determine its back azimuth. Once a rough azimuth is determined, the patrol sets up counter-snipers and scans for the enemy. The patrol sets up a video camera and films the surrounding area for later use as evidence and to closely study the terrain, like people coming to and from the sniper's suspected location. The patrol then moves from cover to cover towards the suspected shooter's location, questions people, and searches for incriminating evidence. The guerrilla sniper does not want to encounter this kind of patrol.

If the targeted security forces are not operating under restraint, they may be able to kill the sniper using other methods. For example, if a patrol determines a sniper is in a particular building, security forces may want to destroy the entire building using heavy artillery, rocket launchers, attack helicopters, or precision aerial bombs. Always, security forces must understand the use of unrestrained firepower to take out a single sniper will result in significant structural damage and possibly civilian deaths.

In many wars – like Israel fighting in Lebanon in the 1980's and Germany fighting in Russia in World War II – the forces responding to an enemy sniper may not care about collateral damage. In fact, they may prefer to inflict disproportionate damage on the surrounding population in an attempt to deter future attacks. One must remember, when the Germans in Stalingrad pounded the city into ruins, they did not make the place any safer from Russian snipers. Just the opposite was true. The same could be said of the Russian destruction of Grozny and the American devastation of Fallujah. The rubbling of any urban area creates more sniper hides. In every situation, the responding forces must balance the destruction of infrastructure and the danger to the populace with the need to eliminate the sniper threat.

Counter-Sniper Teams

If massive force is ineffective or counter-productive or a skilled sniper shows a superior tactical ability thwarting all attempts to locate and surround them, security sniper team has some advantages as a counter-sniper weapon because they understand the art of sniping, how the enemy operates, what their mindset is, and they know the tricks of the trade. Often, it takes a sniper to catch a sniper. forces may need to employ their own counter-snipers to combat their unseen foe. A sniper team has some advantages as a counter-sniper weapon because they understand the art of sniping, how the enemy operates, what their mindset is, and they know the tricks of the trade. Often, it takes a sniper to catch a sniper.

It might take a better trained counter-sniper team to get a lone shooter.

In Stalingrad, Vassili Zaitsev and his specially trained snipers became a counter-sniper fire brigade. Whenever the hard-pressed Russians found themselves under the gun of an effective German sniper, they called in their own snipers to deal with the problem. Zaitsev and his fellow snipers were particularly effective in counter-sniper duties because they were skilled battlefield investigators and knew how to reverse engineer the scene of a shooting to determine the enemy snipers' locations. In most cases, a sniper team has a basic understanding of sniper forensics and can readily apply this knowledge on the battlefield.

Once a sniper team is brought in to track down an enemy sniper, it becomes a battle of wits and tactical ability. Standard counter-sniper methodology begins with determining the general area the enemy is operating in. Once this is known, the counter-snipers use their own experience to narrow down where they think their enemy is positioned. Then, the team sets up a clandestine hide site where they can view the terrain. In short, the counter-sniper team tries to out-sniper their opponent who is using the same techniques against them.

After the counter-sniper team moves into position undetected, they observe the terrain and search for the enemy. The counter-sniper team may catch their opponent moving to or from their sniper position. Or the team may observe their opponent already set up in their position, unaware they are being stalked. Additionally, the enemy may reveal their position by exhibiting unnatural behavior. They might be seen with incriminating physical evidence (like holding a gun in their hands) or being exposed by a flash of light off their scope. If the team cannot find the sniper through observation alone, they might give their enemy bait and lure them into revealing their location.

A classic baiting technique is showing the enemy sniper something to get them to fire a shot, such as the top of a helmet or a stuffed dummy that looks like a human. The effort a counter-sniper team makes to coax a shot from their enemy is limited only by their imaginations. During World War II, German snipers were taught to construct elaborate life-like dummies with paper mâché heads and moving arms. They even placed a burning cigarette in the dummy’s hand, moved the cigarette to the dummy’s head by a string as if smoking, and then blew smoke through a straw attached to the dummy’s head. From a distance, the dummy looked like a careless German sentry having a smoke.

Once the sniper is coaxed into making a shot, the counter-sniper team observes their enemy’s muzzle flash/blast and responds in kind. This duel is truly a chess game because the sniper and counter-sniper both try to reveal each other’s positions through tricks, baits, and ruses. The superior thinker and tactician wins.

In an urban environment, it is helpful for the counter-sniper team to secure a dominant position, which in the city means an elevated one. From an elevated position, the counter-sniper team can see more of the surrounding terrain and may be protected from enemy fire from a lower elevation. In Stalingrad, some of the best sniper positions were in the towering smokestacks in the northern factory district. The snipers positioned atop these chimneys did not have to worry about being outflanked by a sniper in a superior position.

In Israel, the Israelis perfected the art of creating their own elevated positions by raising encased shooting platforms into the air, high above the surrounding buildings, dangling from the ends of heavy cranes. From these metal and glass boxes, the Israeli snipers had dominant bird’s eye views of the urban terrain, helping them to better target their enemies. Law enforcement counter-sniper teams all over the world routinely set up their positions atop the highest structures in the area so they have the best fields of observations. In the cities, a dominant sniper position may be atop an apartment building, a skyscraper, a radio tower, some scaffolding, or even a crane.

Drone Teams

Every counter-sniper effort should involve drone teams. A drone can provide top-down aerial surveillance of an urban area such as scanning rooftops for shooters. A trained and skilled FPV (First Person View) drone operator can easily scan many city blocks of urban terrain in contrast to a static counter-sniper position that can’t move. Drone teams already operate at scale with snipers in the Ukraine War for both sides to include urban environments. Drones provide valuable situational awareness for a counter-sniper team and are a surveillance force multiplier.

Importantly, drones can be used for more than just exterior surveillance. They can and should be used to conduct close target reconnaissance inside buildings and structures. Micro-drones and any small drone that can fit in through a window or other opening can conduct interior urban reconnaissance to reduce the risk of the operator. Thus, a drone operator can search for snipers in the larger urban environment, down to individual buildings and rooms. The limiting factor is the skill of the operator and maintaining connectivity to the drone for command and control.

Drones can conduct exterior urban surveillance, interior close-target reconnaissance and terminal strike operations to assist or even replace sniper operations.

Once a sniper is detected by a drone operator, they can convey this information to a counter-sniper team to take the shot. Or they can use another FPV drone to conduct a terminal strike on the sniper with an explosive munition. In Ukraine, it is common for FPV drone operators to use drones with attached RPG rounds to strike individual targets to include snipers. Already, drones are an essential component of modern urban warfare and can be used to enhance both offensive and defensive sniper operations.

Minimize the Target

An important counter-sniper tactic is simply limiting one's exposure to potential snipers. Do not stand in the middle of an intersection if you can stand behind a wall or car. Do not silhouette yourself by standing on the roof of a building when you can lie down behind an object like a water tank or a generator. Do not stand outside if you can be inside an armored vehicle or inside a building. Do not stand in front of window or a doorway if you can stand to the side and still see outside. Do not stand in the light if you can stand in the shadows. In short, use all of the possible protection available in an urban environment to limit a sniper's view of their potential target.

An effective counter-sniper tool used extensively in World War II on the Eastern Front was the unsung scissors periscope. The scissors periscope was used widely by artillery observers to call in fire and commanders to survey the battlefield in safety. As the war went on, both sides discovered the periscope was an excellent tool to observe the surrounding terrain, free from the fire of enemy snipers. On the German side, in Stalingrad, panzer commanders used periscopes to look outside their tanks, and artillery observers, snipers, guard posts, and various leaders all used the periscope to observe the urban terrain while avoiding death at the hands of the omnipresent Russian snipers.

The simple periscope can still be used today to achieve the same effects and limit exposure of soldiers in sniper-plagued areas. Soldiers in guard towers, vehicles, and sniper hides, as well as those on patrol, can all benefit from the trusty periscope. The periscope allows them to search for enemy snipers, conduct post-shooting assessments, and perform a myriad of battlefield duties in complete safety from a sniper's gaze. Today, there are good tactical periscopes available that are lightweight, affordable, and durable. Believe it or not, the excellent Russian trench periscope from World War II is still available today through surplus stores for as little as $100.00.

Long-Term Investigations

It is quite possible security forces will encounter an urban guerrilla sniper who is superior to them in tactics and methodology and consistently avoids battlefield detection and the best efforts of counter-sniper teams. In these cases, firepower and battlefield measures are ineffective and possibly irrelevant. The next step is conducting a long-term investigation by a dedicated team of professional detectives. Security forces will have to discover the identity of the shooter through the analysis of forensic evidence and good police work to capture the sniper when the sniper is not on the job.

One idea is to place a bounty on the head of the sniper to get the public involved in the search for the shooter. Security forces must then establish the means for the public to contact them like establishing dedicated hot lines, email addresses, and distributing the addresses and phone numbers of local police stations where people can come in to deliver relevant tips. The government can also marshal other resources and show pictures or a description of the suspected shooter on television, air this information on the radio, and place notices in newspapers, on flyers, billboards, and web sites. The battle thus becomes one of information flow. As an example, the police never did solve John Muhammad and Lee Malvo’s urban sniper tactics. But by engaging the public to help find the snipers terrorizing them, the police got a call on their hotline by a person who revealed the shooters’ identities. The police did not capture the DC snipers in the act, they caught them sleeping at a rest stop.

GIGN Counter-Sniper, Paris (2024)
An elevated position enhances observation and gives the shooter a superior firing angle.

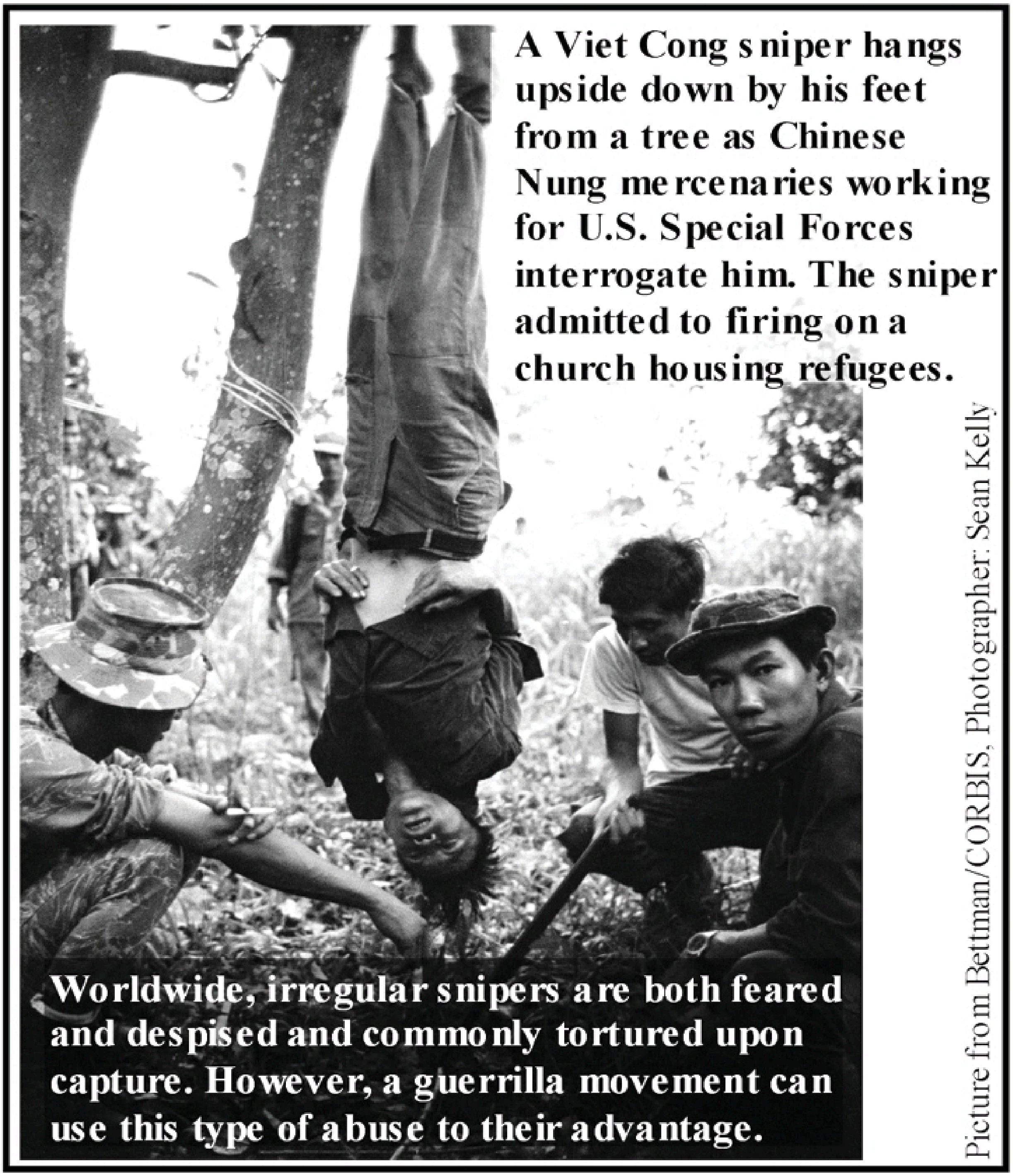
In other environments, law enforcement officials may be incompetent, corrupt, or terrorized into inaction, and incapable of conducting effective long-term investigations. In countries like modern Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Chechnya, the government may suffer from weak institutions and face a largely hostile population uninterested in helping the government solve their sniper problem. Traditional investigations may therefore be impossible through the local police. In these situations, the guerrilla organization sponsoring the sniper has to be infiltrated either through human agents or technical means of penetration like radio and cellular phone intercepts.

Infiltration and Deception

In order to capture some guerrilla snipers, security forces will have to infiltrate the guerrilla organization with an agent. An infiltrator can get into an organization in several ways. An infiltrator can volunteer or be selected into an organization through the group's established recruiting mechanism. Undercover police use this method to infiltrate crime organizations like the Mafia, motorcycle gangs, and other organized criminal groups. Once inside the organization, the infiltrator builds trust with the group and covertly collects information leading to the identity of the sniper.

Or an existing member of the guerrilla organization may be recruited by the government to become an agent. There are several reasons a guerrilla may do this. First, a member may be disillusioned with the cause or reject the methods the group is using on moral, religious, or personal grounds. Eamon Collins, a one-time intelligence officer for the IRA, eventually left that organization and provided an avalanche of information to the British authorities because he grew weary of the war and no longer had the personal commitment to live such an extremely stressful double-life (he was later executed by the IRA). A member may also choose to help the government out of simple greed. In one infamous case in the United States, the FBI's counterintelligence agent Robert Hanssen voluntarily sold information to the Russian KGB for years and received $1.4 million in cash and precious stones. Many insurgents in Iraq have given up information on a sniper for a lot less.

Another means for getting information about the sniper may come through the questioning/interrogation of a captured member of the sniper’s guerrilla organization. The German Gestapo of World War II frequently gathered critical information on resistance groups through the brutal beating and torture of captured partisans. The French in Algeria, from 1954-1962, also used torture to extract key information from captured Algerian insurgents (favorite French methods included electrocution, burning with blow torches, and drowning). The French methods were credited by some for their ability to crack the guerrilla network operating out of the capital of Algiers. However, an interrogation does not have to be brutal to be effective. Captured members of illegal organizations all over the world - from common prison gangs to the Taliban – have all provided information of some sort to security forces through persistent, skilled questioning by trained interrogators.



A Viet Cong sniper hangs upside down by his feet from a tree as Chinese Nung mercenaries working for U.S. Special Forces interrogate him. The sniper admitted to firing on a church housing refugees.

Worldwide, irregular snipers are both feared and despised and commonly tortured upon capture. However, a guerrilla movement can use this type of abuse to their advantage.

Picture from Bettman/CORBIS, Photographer: Sean Kelly

If the human element fails to work for security forces, they may find success with technical means of infiltration. To start, security forces can covertly install electronic listening devices in guerrilla safehouses, residences, or places of work. Security forces can tap the phone lines of suspected guerrillas and intercept their cell phone conversations or radio transmissions. Through these collection methods, security forces may learn of specific information leading to the identity of the sniper. A good example of both human and technical means of infiltration was when British forces got inside the Goldfinger sniper crew with an informant and (most likely) technical equipment. Despite repeated sniper attacks against British soldiers, the Goldfinger crew was never caught in the act. The crew was only busted wide open when a member on the inside gave up his own people.

If security forces cannot penetrate a guerrilla organization through human or technical means, they can make the guerrillas falsely believe they are compromised. For example, Paddy Flood was one of the IRA's top bomb makers and an accomplished sniper who worked out of Derry, Northern Ireland. Since the British were unable to kill him because of the political fall out, they had their informants inside the IRA finger Paddy as a double agent working for the Special Branch. The IRA swallowed the bait because one day in 1990, when Paddy went out to deliver a message for the IRA, he never came back. Only weeks later did his badly mutilated body show up gagged, hands bound behind his back and shot in the head. The IRA thought he was a stool pigeon, so they killed him. Years later, well after the Good Friday peace agreement in 1998, the IRA realized they were deceived – Paddy was never an informant, but they were led to believe so.

A Counter-Sniper Story: The Ramadi Rooftop Executions

Ramadi, Iraq - the capital of Al-Anbar Province and the heart of the Sunni led insurgency - was a dangerous place. Ever since American troops occupied Ramadi in the spring of 2003, they were locked in a vicious contest of wills with determined insurgents. In Ramadi, American and Iraqi security forces experienced the full gamut of guerrilla warfare: car bombings, IEDs, kidnappings and the inevitable torture and executions that followed, ambushes, drive-bys, mortar attacks, and everything in between. On any given day, one was likely to hear the sharp crack of a rifle and then the whiz of a bullet as opposing snipers tried to eliminate each other with a single, well-aimed shot. The situation in Ramadi got so bad that in 2005, a senior American intelligence officer reported that American forces did not control anything past the range of their guns and they had lost all of Al Anbar to the insurgents.

One piece of the Americans’ security plan in Ramadi involved the establishment of sniper posts at key locations in the city. At these outposts, U.S. snipers quietly observed the urban terrain, reported to higher any relevant information about the enemy, and placed discriminating fire into insurgent gunmen so foolish as to expose themselves. Many American snipers in Ramadi – feared by the insurgents for their skill - had multiple kills to their credit as survival of the fittest led to careless enemy gunmen getting picked off one by one. In turn, the insurgents looked for any chance to rid themselves of those deadly shooters.

In June 2004, the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment established three sniper posts overlooking ‘Route Michigan’, the main highway running through Ramadi. One of the sniper posts was located less than a kilometer from the main American base called “Combat Outpost.” This particular sniper post was located in a two-story house, owned by a local Iraqi family, which was only partially built and still under construction. This made for a good location because the Marines did not have to dislocate an Iraqi family to use the building. Every couple of days the four-man sniper team positioned on the roof of the half-built structure was relieved and rotated out with a different team. This system gave the teams time to rest and recover as constant vigilance, 24-hours a day, was mentally and physically fatiguing. Just staring through a sniper scope in the oppressive heat for more than a few minutes, watching the heat waves and mirages dance off the burning pavement, wore you out.

In the early morning hours of June 24, at about one a.m., it was time for a new team to rotate into the outpost. The new team consisted of four Marines: Corporal Tommy Parker Jr., Lance Corporal Deshon Otey, Lance Corporal Juan Lopez, and Lance Corporal Pedro Contreras. Corporal Parker was the team leader and the only school-trained sniper in the group. Initially, everything went as planned. Parker’s team left the base under the cover of darkness, drove to their outpost in Humvees, and took up positions in the house as the other team went back to the base to recover.

When the sun came up over Al Anbar Province and drenched Ramadi with its unmerciful rays, something was amiss. Parker’s team was supposed to report in every thirty minutes to the main base, Combat Outpost. They did so for most of the morning, but then the reports stopped. This in itself was nothing to be alarmed about, because radios had problems all the time and it might take a little while to get them working again. Combat Outpost knew this and their policy was to send a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) to a sniper post only after two hours had gone by. According to official reports, a passing Marine patrol decided to check in with the outpost, just to be sure, less than an hour after the last check by Parker’s team.

When the patrol made it to the outpost at around 11:30 there were no greetings by Parker’s team, there was no guard standing alertly at the entrance, and, in fact, there was no sound at all. The patrol walked up the stairs to the roof to see what was going on and was horrified at what they saw – all four soldiers were dead and now laid in pools of their own blood. Three of them were shot in the head at point blank range and another one suffered multiple gunshot wounds to the body. One Marine even had his throat slit. How did this happen? How did four experienced Marines get killed in broad daylight and never even get off a single shot, all without any sounds being heard? It took a thorough investigation by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) to piece together the killings, but they came up with a likely scenario.

An aerial platform can give the counter-sniper an advantageous shot.

It was no secret the Marines were using the outpost. In fact, the Marines used the same building so often the Iraqis living in the area knew it was a sniper post. Some of the Marines thought this was a bad idea because they were setting a pattern the enemy could study and then make a plan for. Parker himself knew they were setting themselves up for an ambush and sooner or later they would get hit. Before that fateful June morning, Parker told his wife, Carla, “No wonder people are dying. They’re sending us to the same place, by the same route at the same time of day.” Also, before the killings, other Marines on patrol saw Iraqis entering the building, holding conversations as if they were discussing how to finish up construction on the house the Marines were using as an outpost. These Iraqis knew the house intimately and knew the exact location and procedures of the Marines using the house. This access to and knowledge of the house proved fatal.

The NCIS investigators later determined the Iraqi “Carbede” family put out a hit on the sniper team. Investigators know this because an intercepted cell phone conversation between Carbede family members revealed they authorized the hit and, “they were going to ‘do these Marines.’” Then, a four-man hit team was assembled to take them out. Since the Marines’ patterns were already known, as was the exact layout of the house, the hit team was able to study their objective and come up with a plan to take out the Marines. Instead of fighting the Marines one on one, the hit team decided to use deception and pose as construction workers. Sometime in the morning this hit team arrived at the house.

No one knows what happened exactly, except the hit team. But here is a possible scenario: The hit team drove up near the outpost and got out of their car. They walked to the house dressed as laborers with accompanying paraphernalia like toolboxes and paint buckets. The hit team was cautious, but they did not try and hide their presence either. They walked right up to the house, went inside, and started to work on the house with their tools. One of the Marines probably went downstairs and investigated, gun at the ready. However, the cautious Marine was met with a wave of a hand, a friendly smile, and a jovial, “Hello, mister!” Since the Iraqis were obviously working on the house, were not trying to hide anything, and worked on the house in the past, the Marine thought nothing of it and went back to the roof.

The sniper team continued to call in their reports every half an hour but failed to mention anything about the Iraqis in the house because the men worked there in the past, the outpost never reported the workers before, and the four men looked like harmless construction workers. The hit team worked in the house as they observed the Marines. They worked their way up to the second floor so they were near the stairwell leading to the roof. One of the hit men began working on or near the stairs so he had a good view of the Marines on the roof. As the Iraqi worked diligently on his project, he stole glances at the roof, pinpointing exactly where the Marines were and what they were doing. He could see two of the Americans were lying down asleep and the other two were focused on watching Route Michigan.

The hit team kept one man near the roof as a lookout as the other three went down to the first floor, made a plan, and got out their weapons. The time was 10:40 a.m. They went back up to the second floor and their lookout nodded to them – the Marines were completely vulnerable and not worried about them at all. It was now or never. The shooters walked calmly past their lookout and up onto the roof with their folding stock AK-47’s silenced with sound suppressors. The two Marines who were on sniper duty, Otey and Lopez, were shot first. Parker and Contreras, who were lying asleep on the roof, never heard a thing and were shot next since they were no immediate threat to the killers.

As soon as the shooting was over, one of the killers left the building to get the car. Another man went to the bottom floor to act as a lookout. The other two stripped the dead Marines of all their equipment to include two sniper rifles (one of which was Corporal Parker’s rifle), four M16A4s, twenty-four magazines for the M16s, eight hand grenades, the Marines’ PRC-119F radio, and an excellent AN/PAS-13 thermal weapon sight for shooting at night. As soon as their car was ready, the team loaded the stolen equipment into the trunk. It took a couple minutes to get it all, but they had plenty of time. They knew exactly what Combat Outpost’s patrol schedule was. It was less than ten minutes from the time the first shots were fired to the time all four men were in their car driving off. By 10:50 a.m., the hit team was gone, on their way to a safehouse somewhere in the city. Only at 11:30 did the Marine patrol arrive and find out why the outpost was not returning their calls.

Fallujah, Iraq
U.S. marines show excellent tradecraft to draw enemy fire, allowing them to return a loophole shot.

Analysis of the Rooftop Killings

The Marines killed in the outpost were taken by complete surprise by the insurgents' unconventional methods. The Marines were ready to defend themselves from the most likely threat, an opposing sniper, and the insurgents knew this. While the Marines were well prepared for the obvious attack, they left their back door wide open, quite literally. The Marines' biggest error was using a half-built house for an outpost and continuing to let the laborers work on it. Since the house was still under construction, the insurgents knew they could use a ruse and pose as workers to gain access into the building. The

Marines in the outpost got sloppy, never searched the workers, and failed to place a guard on them as they worked.

Since the Marines in Ramadi interacted with and worked in close proximity to Iraqi civilians all the time, day after day, they were overwhelmed by the sheer number of people. They were unable to distinguish an insurgent from innocent people as the insurgents blended in with the population. As long as the insurgents looked and acted like everyone else when the Americans were watching them, they were invisible. The insurgents who took out the outpost were able to do so because they mimicked the dress, body language, and actions of a regular work crew. There was nothing to indicate they were anything other than poor workers trying to make a living. In short, the insurgents took advantage of the complex, uncertain environment that is modern urban guerrilla warfare.

Not only did the insurgents exploit the urban and human terrain, they developed and executed a well-thought out plan of action. Obviously, they studied the Marine outpost in depth, knew the Marines' procedures, understood the quick reaction force's limitations, and were able to pull off, in broad daylight, an utterly silent hit (most likely with suppressed weapons, after all how did no one hear all the shooting

when the outpost was on a roof only 800 meters from Combat Outpost, which housed thousands of soldiers?). No matter how one looks at it, this was a successful operation due to accurate intelligence, detailed planning, and maximum use of use of deception and surprise.

The insurgents benefited from this counter-sniper operation in many ways. First, they captured two excellent sniper rifles that could not be traced to them in any way. Even the M16A4s were accurate enough to be urban sniper weapons. Second, the capture of the AN/PAS-13 thermal sight allowed some guerrilla sniper in the future to target American soldiers at night, when it was pitch-black out, because thermal sights do not require any light source whatsoever to be effective. Third, the killing of the Marines provided great material for insurgent propaganda that was distributed on the internet for the world to see and given away on CDs in Iraq's streets for the average Iraqi to watch. Finally, the killings contributed greatly to a Marine

Corps reaction requiring more Marines to go out on a sniper mission, making these sniper operations less effective and more vulnerable to detection because of their increased signature.

Two Years Later: Payback in Habbaniyah

In the sweltering heat of the Iraqi summer, a United States Marine Corps scout sniper team from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment lay in wait in a concealed sniper hide near Habbaniyah, Iraq. The date was June 16, 2006. As the team surveyed the urban terrain, they noticed something out of the ordinary. A military-age Iraqi male was sitting in the back seat of a parked passenger car, filming a passing American Marine patrol consisting of amphibious assault vehicles. The team also observed a rifle in the back seat. The Marine sniper team radioed down to the patrol that they were being watched by a sniper and to take caution. After warning the patrol, the guerrilla sniper reached for his rifle in preparations for making a shot.

The Marine sniper observed this and drew a bead on the insurgent’s head. One well placed round was enough to kill the would-be sniper. The heavy 7.62 mm bullet struck the rear passenger window, shattered the glass, deflected very little off its flight path, and punched straight into the sniper’s head. There was very little bullet deflection because the rear glass of the window was thin and weak and the target’s head was close to the window, only about a foot away. Then, the Marine snipers saw another young Iraqi male approach the passenger side door of the vehicle. He was surprised to find his companion dead in the back seat of their car. This second male then ran to the other side of the car and tried to drive off. He never had a chance. The Marine snipers shot him with three rounds from an M-4 carbine firing 5.56 mm rounds. The driver died on the scene. As the Marines searched the car, they discovered the rifle in the back seat was one of their own: a camouflaged, Marine-issue, 7.62 mm, M-40A1 sniper rifle.

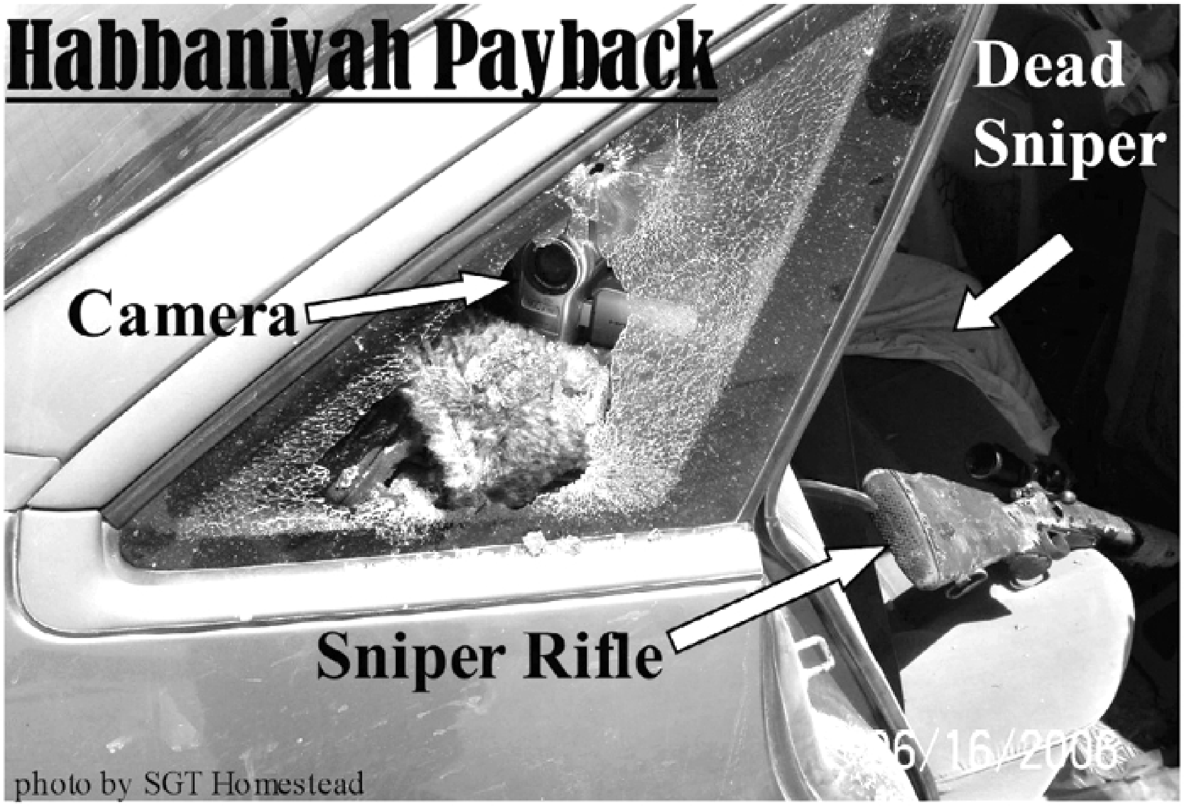


photo by SGT Homestead

Here is an actual picture of the insurgent sniper in Habbaniyah who was taken out by Marine snipers.

After searching the vehicle, the Marines found some tools of the trade the Iraqi snipers had with them. The insurgents had several different license plates so they could change the identity of the car. License plates were important for deceiving the local police since different provinces used different plates and there were different levels of plates, like the much sought after official government plates. There were also several dozen rounds of 7.62 mm ammo for the M40A1 rifle, a pistol, a camcorder, a hand grenade, an M-16 magazine, and other items.

What intrigued the Marines most was that the insurgent sniper team used one of their very own sniper rifles against them. Over the course of the previous three years of guerrilla warfare in Iraq, the Marines lost several of their sniper rifles to the insurgents after Marine sniper teams were killed by the guerrillas and stripped of their equipment. So where did this rifle come from? Who owned it last? Since the rifle still had a serial number, it was an easy task to check the number with the Marines’ own records. The serial number trace revealed this was the same rifle issued to Corporal Parker several years ago and stripped from his body on that Ramadi rooftop. The rifle had come full circle.

The Insurgent Sniper Team’s Methodology

What can we determine about this guerrilla sniper team? First, they were probably an experienced team and conducted similar attacks in the past. They were professionals as can be seen by their choice of a car as their firing platform. Since a car is a mobile platform, the sniper can shoot, drive off, and disappear in seconds. Also, they chose a car, not a van, as a van would be a more obvious choice as a sniping platform. Also, the team understood the importance of information warfare and used every sniper attack as a propaganda victory over the American occupiers. The sniper intended to film the American patrol as it approached, set the camcorder on the rear seat with the patrol still in its view, take a shot so it was all captured on film, and then drive away.

This team had different jobs during their attack. The driver’s job was to find a good location to park the car. His second was to get out, walk around, and conduct reconnaissance of the area to ensure there were no threats to the sniper. In this case, the driver failed to detect the Marine sniper team hidden in a nearby building. One can guess when the Marine sniper fired his shot and killed the guerrilla sniper, the driver of the car thought the gunshot was from his companion. Hence, when the driver got back to the car to take off, he was surprised to see his dead friend sprawled across the back seat.

The insurgent sniper team was good but made several crucial mistakes. First, the driver did not study the urban terrain sufficiently and failed to detect the opposing Marine snipers. Regardless, every guerrilla sniper must prepare for their shot as if they were under direct observation, regardless if they detect a threat or not. The insurgent sniper team failed to employ any urban camouflage like tinted windows, stickers, curtains, or sunshades even though they were readily available in the local Iraqi markets and would raise no suspicion.

Because the insurgent sniper failed to effectively conceal himself within the car, he was observed by an American sniper with a clear view of his activities through the unobstructed glass of the vehicle. Another mistake the sniper made was letting himself be observed while openly filming an American convoy with a camcorder. In the wartime environment of Iraq, anyone seen filming security forces is presumed to be gathering information for a future attack. A guerrilla must conceal everything they do and the camcorder could have easily been concealed in a plastic bag with a hole cut out for the camera lens.

The final mistake the insurgent sniper made was reaching for his sniper rifle, in the open, without camouflaging the weapon in any way. For unknown reasons, the rifle was not concealed in urban camouflage like a newspaper, a jacket, or a simple scarf. Importantly, the American sniper knew he could take a shot because he saw the insurgent sniper reach for his rifle. In this case, the insurgent sniper team made numerous mistakes which ultimately contributed to their deaths.

Counter-Sniper Limitations

Ultimately, these counter-sniper methods will not solve the threat of snipers. What do I mean by this? These methods may work against a lone sniper like Charles Whitman in the Texas Tower or the DC snipers. A determined, entrenched, mature guerrilla movement using snipers on a large scale is a different beast altogether. A covert organization designed to survive security force scrutiny is so resilient and has so many potential targets to choose from they can never be stopped altogether. Their effects can only be limited. The only way to stop the threat of guerrilla snipers is to defeat the movement spawning these shooters.

History supports this rather sober assessment. Army. Israel, considered by many to be one of the best militaries in the world, has failed to stop PLO snipers from killing their soldiers and people for the last forty years. The British and their counter-insurgency machine in Northern Ireland also never stopped the threat of IRA snipers from 1969 to1998. The IRA only stopped shooting people after they signed the Good Friday peace agreement in 1998 and voluntarily put down their arms. The urban sniper-terror in Sarajevo, perpetrated by Serbian shooters, came to conclusion in 1996 when both sides agreed to end the war.

Widespread education and training in counter-sniper tactics will reduce the vulnerability of a populace and security forces to guerrilla snipers. It is better to have only one hundred sniper victims a year, as opposed to a thousand. But, as history has repeatedly shown, only a death blow to the guerrilla organization sponsoring a sniper campaign will lower the crosshairs from their targets permanently.

This Navy SEAL sniper team can kill an enemy shooter, but they can't defeat the movement.
Iraq, 2017

Chapter 9

Sniper Forensics

Just as we find it necessary to understand the enemy's interrogation techniques or surveillance and to train to overcome such obstacles, so too we must tackle the problem of Forensic Science.

- IRA Counter-Forensics Manual

Many of the shots were from the back of a specially converted car which was immediately driven away to avoid leaving any forensic traces.

- From the British report on Operation Banner, referencing the PIRA's Goldfinger sniper crew in South Armagh

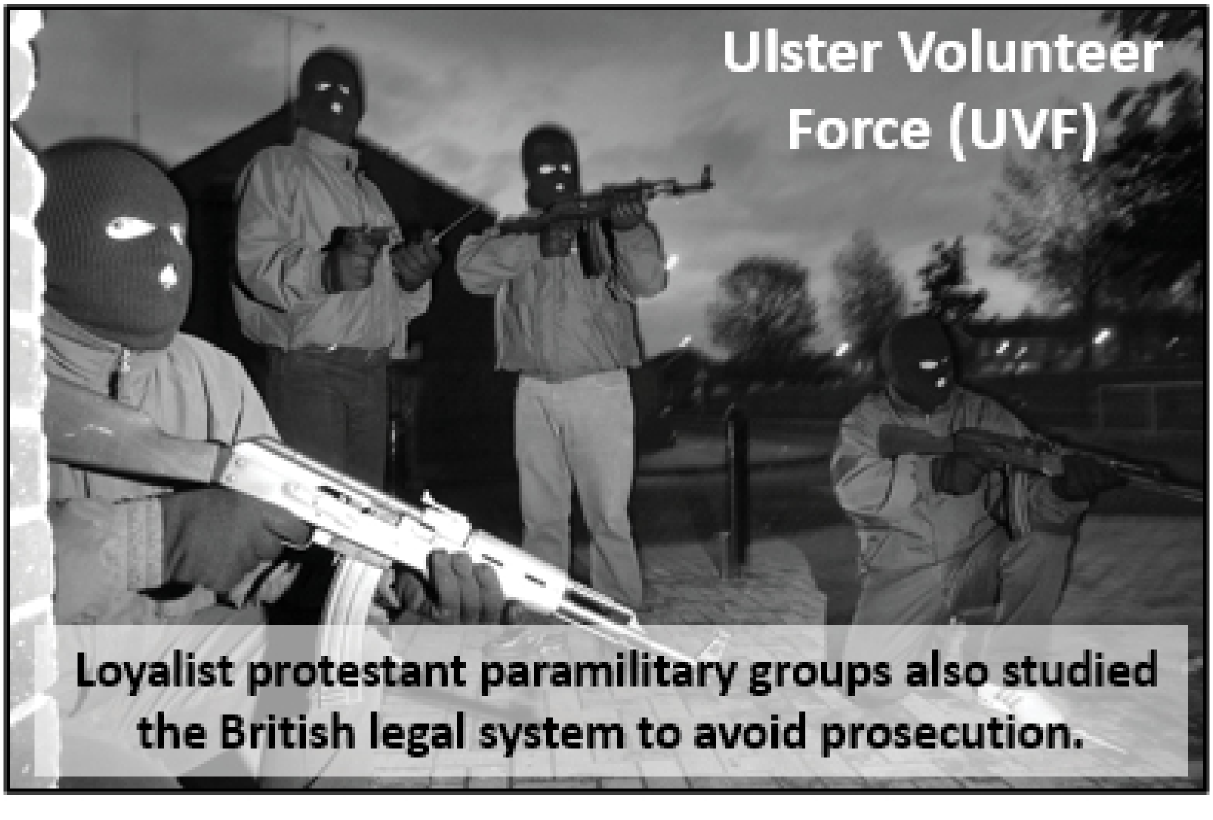
The Foundation for Successful Counter-Sniping

Effective counter-insurgency forces have at their foundation a forensic mindset. This forensic approach enables security forces to take a discriminatory approach to counter-sniper operations. This discrimination minimizes civilian casualties, reduces infrastructure damage, and therefore limits a guerrilla organization's most potent weapon – bad press which shows government security forces as incompetent at best and murderous at worst. Importantly, forensic investigation is a way for security forces to pick the lone guerrilla out of the sea of people. Plus, forensic investigation increases the guerrilla sniper's problems. Even if the shooter escapes the government's massive firepower or immediate dragnet of security forces, a competent team of investigators may still run them to ground.

These investigators may not get the sniper right away, but they will collect evidence over the course of days, weeks, months, and even years, leading to eventual exposure of the sniper. However, every war is different and guerrilla snipers face varying levels of forensic scrutiny depending on their own unique operational environment. We will briefly look at the forensic situations in Northern Ireland, Chechnya, and Iraq as they are some of the most recent experiences and were fought by the most advanced militaries in the world.

The IRA in Northern Ireland, 1969-1998

In Northern Ireland, the British's 20,000 soldiers and the 8,000 man Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) possessed an excellent forensic capability. As a result, IRA snipers were extremely thorough in their counter-forensic approach. Even the slightest clue, like a fingerprint or a drop of blood, could incriminate and expose an IRA shooter. Importantly, the war in Northern Ireland was small, almost microscopic, when compared to other wars. For example, some estimates placed the IRA's average operational strength at about three hundred active fighters, operating in a country with a population of only 1.5 million people. British investigators faced relatively few guerrilla fighters and perhaps a dozen dedicated snipers at any one time.



Loyalist protestant paramilitary groups also studied the British legal system to avoid prosecution.

The IRA had to practice extreme forensic discipline to survive under such scrutiny. Because the British army and Northern Ireland security forces, like the RUC, had to operate with restraint (blowing up Irish family residences to get an IRA sniper was politically unacceptable) IRA gunmen worried little about being killed during their attack. However, the gunmen were very concerned with the British's investigative dragnet that would produce mind-bending interrogation sessions, suffocating surveillance, and unrelenting harassment of IRA suspects. The greatest threat to the IRA sniper was not the immediate reaction by their victims, it was the government's long-term investigation backed up by an aggressive team of forensic detectives and specialists.

Chechen Rebels, 1994-2006

Chechnya, like Northern Ireland, also had a small population of only 1.1 million people. The resistance movement there was estimated at its peak at 10,000 fighters with an undetermined number of supporters. It is likely a majority of the population, which hated the Russians, undermined the Russian occupation in some form. In Chechnya, the Russians faced the same problem every foreign occupier does – they did not speak the language and they did not fit in with the population.

The Russians' 100,000-man army occupying Chechnya was a conscript force with a low degree of overall professionalism and counter-insurgency competence. As a result, the Russians' ability to conduct battlefield investigations was poor and their indigenous surrogates - the Chechen government - corrupt, infiltrated, and inept. Because of these problems, the Russian military and Chechen government were unable to conduct the investigations required to track down all the snipers they faced.

Unlike the British security forces, the Russian military policy towards Chechen guerrilla snipers was one of massive force and overwhelming response, even if this resulted in debilitating structural damage and widespread civilian deaths. All suspected guerrillas were captured and tortured in "filtration camps" as a matter of policy and suspected guerrilla snipers were tortured then killed. Therefore, the Chechen guerrilla sniper was most concerned with escaping immediate Russia firepower after a shooting (the Russians would bomb an entire city block to get one sniper) and then avoid the suspicion of being a guerrilla. The Russians were not overly concerned with forensic evidence. A suspected Chechen who fit the

Russian profile for a guerrilla sniper was simply killed just to be on the safe side.

The Iraqi Insurgents, 2003-2008

Consider the situation the American military faced in Iraq. Iraq had a population estimated at 27 million people and Baghdad alone, with a population estimated at six million people, had more people than all of Northern Ireland and Chechnya combined. High-end estimates of the Iraqi insurgency topped out at 20,000 active fighters with 250,000 dedicated supporters. Among all these fighters, America's 140,000-man army may have faced a hundred individual snipers. In a conflict of such magnitude, where close to 40,000 individual insurgent attacks were recorded in 2005 alone, the American and Iraqi government battlefield investigative ability was simply overwhelmed.

As with any conventional army, the American army was not designed to conduct widespread battlefield investigations and thus found itself unable to successfully and thoroughly follow up most sniper attacks. If an insurgent sniper was not immediately detected and captured after a shooting, they would most likely get away with their attack. As a result, the Iraqi insurgent sniper was worried most about making an immediate escape as opposed to withstanding the scrutiny of a prolonged investigation.

Furthermore, because American soldiers did not speak the language and did not blend into Iraqi society, their ability to conduct investigations was limited. Compounding the problem was their indigenous surrogates, the Iraqi police, suffered from widespread corruption, professional ineptness, and insurgent infiltration. As a result, an Iraqi insurgent had a much better chance to get away with repeated sniper attacks than did IRA snipers operating in Northern Ireland. And since the U.S. military was more restrained and disciplined than the Russians in Chechnya, they rarely used massive firepower to kill a lone shooter.

Suspected Chechen rebels being transported to a Russian filtration camp

The IRA's Forensic Discipline

While all guerrillas try to get away with their activities, the IRA took their operations to a higher level of counter-forensic discipline. The IRA had to achieve a new forensic plateau because they faced (arguably) the best counter-insurgency forces in the world. The British Special Air Service (SAS), the 14th Military Intelligence Security Company, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary combined to make a formidable collection of counter-insurgency specialists. Through sheer survival of the fittest, the IRA had to either adapt to their enemy or collapse as an organization. The IRA adapted. In fact, the IRA displayed some of the most sophisticated urban guerrilla warfare methodology seen in any conflict to date.

As part of this adaptive process, the IRA studied the British authorities' forensic capabilities. After fighting for decades and having hundreds of its members incarcerated, investigated, and questioned, the IRA as a whole formed a large pool of counter-forensic knowledge. Consequently, the IRA leadership tapped into this pool and created a counter-forensics manual, which it published and distributed to IRA members. Author Tony Geraghty managed to gain access to the IRA's counter-forensics manual in his work The Irish War and revealed the IRA's level of counter-forensics instruction.

The IRA leadership understood the seriousness of the forensic threat and the manual clearly relays this: "Just as we find it absolutely necessary to understand the enemy's interrogation techniques or surveillance and to train to overcome such obstacles, so to we must tackle the problem of Forensic Science. We cannot afford to lose Oglaigh [volunteers] at any time, much less through sloppy preparation or execution of any operation. Not only can it cause us major problems in our operational capacity but the political mileage we achieve from a successful operation can be lost, or at the very least reduced, due to arrests."

The manual recognizes the tactics and thoroughness of the RUC, explaining their investigative procedures: "They will seek out witnesses not solely for identification but to establish the sequence of events: who came from where, who did what, was a vehicle used, what time did it happen, etc… It allows them with their Forensic Scientists to search for the type of evidence they would expect to find associated with the type of operation. It may be useful to employ a delaying tactic (such as a hoax bomb or booby trap) which apart from having obvious military advantages, also allows for time to lapse during which forensic evidence may be dispersed or destroyed."

The manual also specifically addressed the kinds of incriminating evidence the IRA guerrilla must avoid during an operation. The guerrilla should be aware that their hair (or wigs used for disguises) collects traces of explosive and chemical residue. Also, hair products, like gels and sprays, can be collected from their hair and then matched with the actual hair products kept at their homes.

Additionally, the manual covered in detail the problem created by firing a weapon and the resulting gunshot residue. When a weapon is fired, the shooter is covered in an invisible cloud of residue – consisting mainly of lead, antimony, and barium- which may deposit itself on the firer's clothing, hair, hands, face, and even in their nasal passage. The manual suggests the firer wear protective outer garments, including a mask that is washed as soon as the operation is over: “All clothes used during the operation should be washed immediately. It is now standard practice for the RUC when searching a house for trace evidence to take the filters from washing machines, or waste water from pipes, in order to analyze them for fibers, residues, etc… Always wash clothes by hand and dispose of the water into an outside drain, back garden or yard.”

Clothes are a subject of concern for the IRA guerrilla, not just because of gunshot residue, but as a forensic link: “Fibers are the major forensic danger. They are links in a chain and can cross transfer in a number of ways… For example, if a fiber from an Oglach’s [volunteer] sleeve could be found on a glove and a fiber from the glove found on a weapon, a link between weapon and Volunteer could be established. As we go about our daily business we are constantly shedding and picking up fibers of no significance. If we make such contacts as republican activists while engaged on active service we should understand a very basic crucial lesson – applicable to the forensic threat in general – “Every contact leaves a trace” and therefore also a potential link.”

The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) conducted terrorism related investigations in Northern Ireland.

The IRA guerrilla is advised to wear clothes that do not easily provide this kind of incriminating trace fiber. For example, clothes made of wool, which shed fibers everywhere, should never be worn. Nylon and denim clothing are the safest to wear since they shed such few fibers. Washed blue denim jeans are the clothing of choice because they are made from a fiber that “is so common that it is microscopically indistinguishable from all other denim. It is of no use to the forensic scientist.”

When using masks, there are procedures to be followed: “We do suggest, however, that the Oglaigh use ladies’ nylon stockings as masks. If the Oglach is not fully happy with this disguise another mask can be worn over the top of the nylon stocking. The stocking would be a forensic barrier…Nylons can be easily burnt, destroying any possible trace evidence. This should be done after every operation.”

DNA is another area of concern for the IRA guerrilla: “Taking suitable material for DNA testing from a captured Oglach is no simple task. Under their law they only have the power to carry out non-intimate searches on any ‘suspect’…Even doctors cannot carry out blood tests. The only so-called non-intimate search they can do is the ‘mouth swab’. There is however dispute among scientists as to the reliability of the tests. [But] if an Oglach has been wounded they will take his or her clothing or bandages and use them to make a forensic link.”

As the reader can see, preventing or eliminating every one of the potentially incriminating links is difficult to say the least. The greater the government’s forensic ability, the more counter-forensic hurdles the guerrilla sniper has to jump. With an effective forensic effort, security forces anticipate the urban guerrilla sniper will eventually slip up in one area or more, even if the sniper is aware of potentially incriminating evidence. While the IRA took its counter-forensic efforts seriously, even their manual was not thorough enough to protect the guerrilla sniper from eventual forensic compromise. The guerrilla sniper has far more to be concerned with if they are to remain anonymous.

Forensic Ballistics: Investigating the Scene of a Shooting

Security forces involved in fighting an organized guerrilla movement must have the ability to conduct multiple effective crime-scene investigations simultaneously. This is a particular problem for conventional military forces with no training in this area. However, this is no excuse as basic skills such as protecting a crime scene, preserving, identifying, collecting, and logging evidence, and interviewing witnesses can be readily learned. Most security forces think they do not need these skills, which is the most serious problem. One must understand in a guerrilla war, soldiers are not only soldiers, but they are also policeman, investigators, detectives, researches, students, and historians all rolled into one.

Analyzing Recovered Bullets

If basic crime scene investigation is easy to learn, where do we start? Let us begin with the one piece of incriminating evidence that remains after every single shooting in the world: the bullet. When a person is shot somewhere in their body, the bullet itself remains as a link to the shooter. Or, if the bullet misses its mark and lodges in something else, like a door frame, this incriminating link can be recovered and analyzed. The bullet is important because it speaks volumes about the shooter. Even casual observation by the naked eye will reveal the caliber of the bullet. A 5.56 mm bullet is quickly distinguished from a 7.62 mm bullet just as a 9 mm slug is readily discerned from a .45 caliber one. A quick study of the retrieved bullet will determine the caliber of the weapon, what kind of weapon fired the bullet (rifle or pistol), which together can lead to the origin of the rifle, such as Soviet, American, or German.

Casual study of the bullet offers some conclusions, but closer investigation reveals even more. When a bullet is fired from a rifled barrel it no longer looks pristine as when it comes fresh out of the box. In contrast, the grooves from the barrel’s rifling are forced into the sides of the bullet, leaving impressions visible to the human eye. While the human eye is not capable of detecting the unique characteristics left by the rifling, a microscope is.

Expanding Bullets

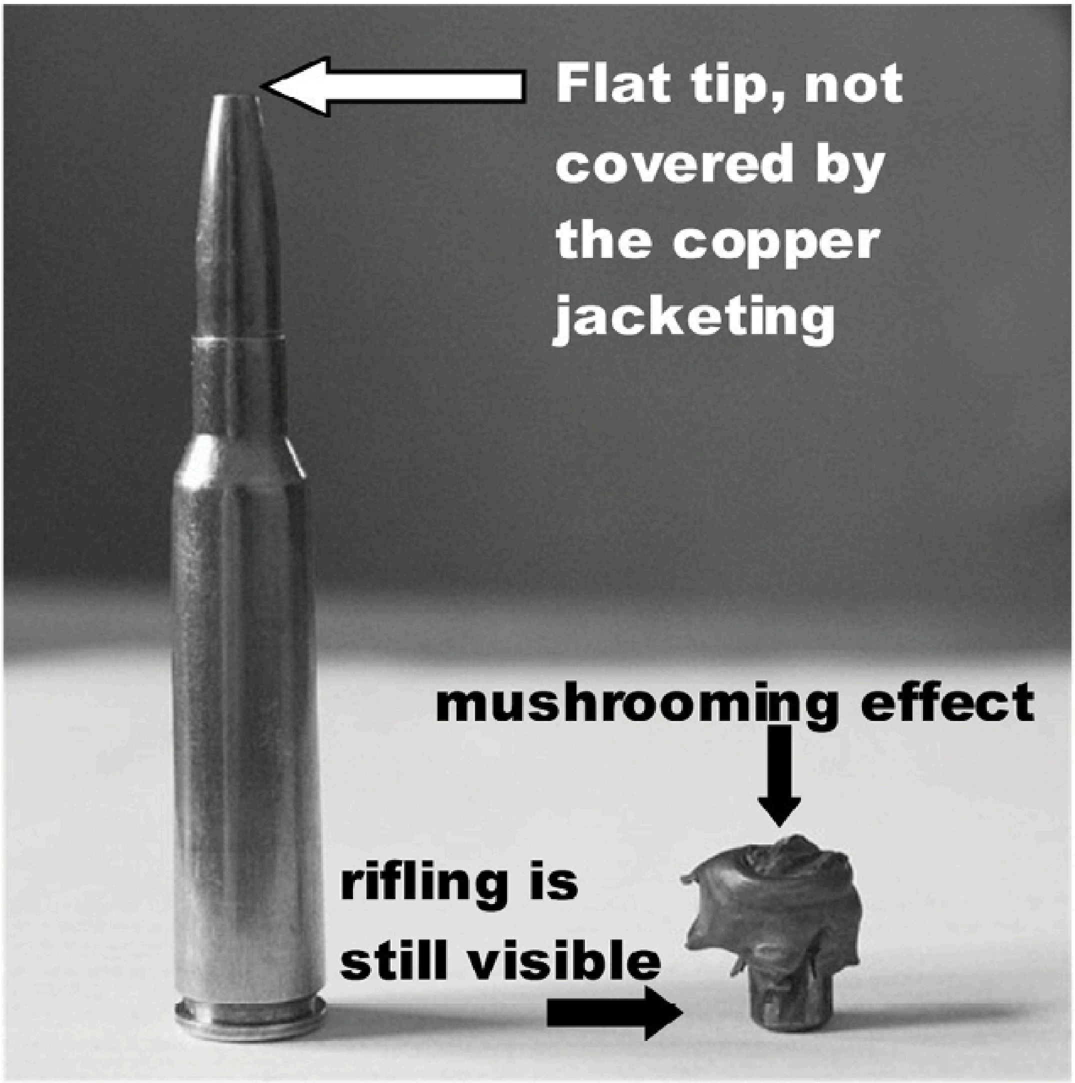

Flat tip, not covered by the copper jacketing
mushrooming effect
rifling is still visible

Photo by Gustaf Eriksson

6.5 x 55 mm rifle round shot into a moose

Even though this soft-point ammunition is designed to mushroom, there is enough rifling left to study.

Rifling marks are important because they can be matched to a specific weapon as every weapon leaves its own unique impressions on each and every bullet. For example, two separate Russian-made SVD sniper rifles each leave their own unique rifling impressions on their respective bullets despite the rifles being mass-produced copies of the same original design. In this sense, the rifling impressions left on a bullet are the weapon's fingerprint, as unique as the ridges found on a person's own hand. Because the rifling impressions on each bullet are unique, a bullet can be matched to the exact weapon that fired it. All an investigator has to do is compare a bullet recovered from the scene of a shooting with a comparison bullet fired from the suspected weapon to positively confirm or deny if the weapon fired the bullet.

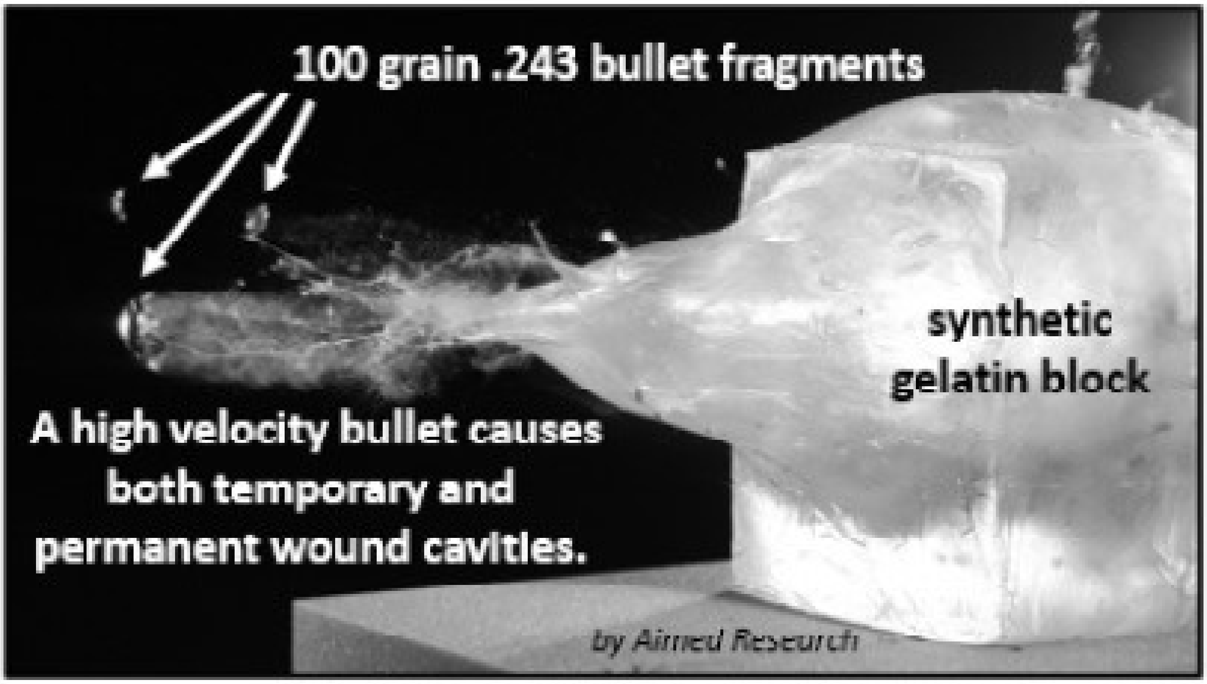
Most likely, the bullets the battlefield detective encounters will be similar because of the Hague Convention of 1899 which determined what type of bullets the world's militaries use today. To quote: "The Contracting Parties agree to abstain from the use of bullets which expand or flatten easily in the human body, such as bullets with a hard envelope which does not entirely cover the core, or is pierced with incisions."

That one sentence guided the evolution of military bullet production ever since. As a direct result of this agreement, the most commonly fired bullets in a war zone are fully metal jacketed (FMJ) rifle rounds. NATO countries, like the United States, Germany and Britain, all fire 5.56 mm and 7.62 mm FMJ rounds from their battle rifles. Former Soviet Block countries, like Russia, Poland, and Romania, fire 5.45 mm and 7.62 mm FMJ rounds from their battle rifles. Since the U.S./NATO and Soviet Union/Warsaw Pact superpowers ruled the Cold War for more than four decades, the majority of the weapons in the world, from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, fire 5.54/5.56 mm and 7.62 mm FMJ rounds. What does this mean to us? When one examines a wound and the corresponding bullet, we know what kind of bullet we are likely to find.

Importantly, these FMJ bullets exhibit similar characteristics. All FMJ rounds are of durable construction and designed to penetrate their targets while traveling at high velocities. Consequently, the bullet itself deforms little when hitting bone and flesh, because the bullet's copper jacketing is designed to maintain the integrity of the bullet, even when impacting something hard. When we find a sniper's FMJ bullet lodged in a victim, the chances are the bullet will be intact, allowing us to analyze and match the rifling on the bullet with the gun that fired it. On the other hand, because these FMJ rounds travel at such high-velocities, they often leave through-and-through wounds of the body, meaning the bullet goes into and out of the person's body. With these types of wounds, the incriminating bullet is lost somewhere in the surrounding terrain.

Even with a through-and-through wound, FMJ bullets exhibit certain wound characteristics. For example, high velocity FMJ rifle rounds often cause large temporary wound cavities, injure surrounding organs and tissue due to bullet shock waves, and leave smaller permanent wound cavities. The Russian 5.54 mm and the American 5.56 mm rounds have a tendency to yaw upon hitting the human body, causing the rounds to tumble and create much larger wounds than if they continued straight ahead.

Ironically, the signatories of the Hague Convention intended FMJ bullets to be a more humane way of killing and wounding each other. I am not sure what the several million people who have since been shot and killed by these bullets, would think of such an assertion. From a forensics perspective, a FMJ bullet is more likely to retain its integrity, allowing for successful analysis and matching to the weapon that fired it. The disadvantage of a FMJ bullet is it tends to travel completely through the human body, so an investigator may have a gunshot wound victim with no bullet to analyze.


100 grain .243 bullet fragments
synthetic gelatin block
A high velocity bullet causes both temporary and permanent wound cavities.
by Airned Research

Civilian Bullets

In the hunting, personal defense, and law enforcement arenas, the goal is to kill your target, be it human or animal, as quickly as possible. In the hunting world, there are no constraints on the shooters to wound their prey in a more humane manner. In fact, hunters in America who stalk deer and other large game are prohibited by law from using FMJ bullets because they are not sufficiently lethal. Hunting laws demand hunters use soft-point rounds that mushroom on impact. The resulting mushroom creates a larger permanent wound cavity and ensures the bullet will stay in the animal – not pass cleanly through it like a FMJ round.

Soft-point rifle ammunition not only mushrooms but is designed to still penetrate into the target. This combination results in a highly deformed bullet, where the first two-thirds of the bullet are deformed beyond all recognition. However, the remaining one-third of the bullet retains its integrity, allowing forensic investigators to analyze and match the bullet based on the rifling marks left on the base of the bullet. With soft-points, there is less chance of a through-and-through wound.

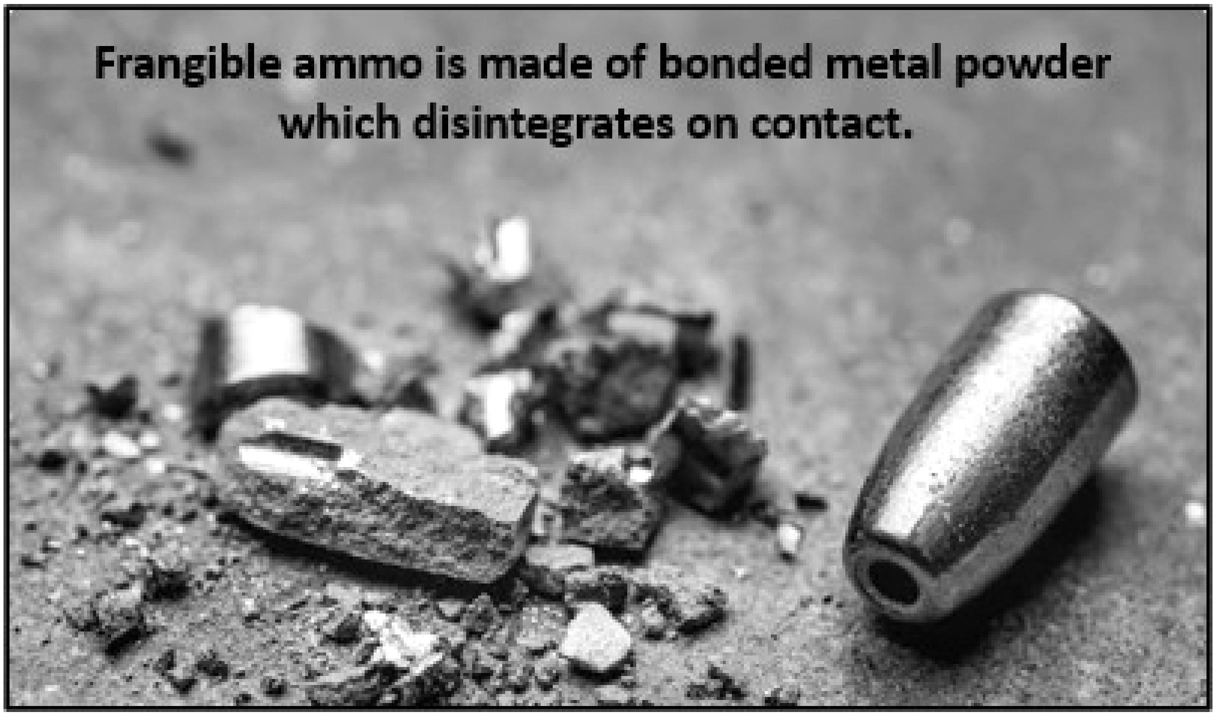
Law-enforcement officers also prefer soft-point ammunition, but because of legal liability issues. A police department does not want its officers firing hyper-velocity FMJ rounds that will streak through a criminal and then hit an innocent bystander like a woman or child. From a liability standpoint, the police want their bullets to hit a criminal and stay inside them.

People using weapons for personal defense often shoot hollow-point rounds to inflict as much damage on an attacker as possible. Hollow-point rounds are designed to mushroom immediately upon impact, sacrificing penetration for a larger wound cavity. These gun owners, who need to protect their families from criminals armed with anything from knives to handguns, want to hit their assailant and put them down for good. They do not want the assailant to get off a dying shot or get to their loved ones in a final, adrenaline-fueled frenzy. Hollow-point rounds, when hitting flesh and bone, mushroom and often fragment. Since these types of rounds have relatively poor penetration ability, these rounds tend to stay in the body so investigators will have something to study. On the other hand, because these bullets suffer from such deformity, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to match the bullet with the weapon that fired it.

While these are the most common rounds used, there are some less popular ones that make forensic analysis of the round difficult, if not impossible. For example, a shooter may fire a sabot round out of their weapon, a bullet encased in a plastic shoe (sabot is French for the word shoe). As the bullet is fired, the plastic shoe is engaged by the rifling and is launched out of the weapon. During flight, the plastic shoe falls away while the bullet continues down range and into the target. Because the plastic shoe engages the rifling, not the bullet, there is much less friction and the bullet travels at greater velocities – as fast as 4000 feet per second.

As a result, there are rifling marks on the plastic shoe, but none on the bullet. This situation would definitely make a forensic investigator scratch their head when they recovered a bullet, smooth as a baby's bottom, with no rifle scoring whatsoever on it. The investigator would have problems since they would be unable to match the bullet to the rifle. They would have to first find the expended sabot, then match that to the rifle and then match the bullet to the plastic shoe. This rifle-sabot-bullet connection would be no easy task since the plastic shoe does not hold marks on it like metal does. More importantly, a sabot round would enable a shooter to fire a bullet with rifle scoring on it from a different rifle. This way, a shooter could introduce misleading evidence into a shooting scene in order to frame someone else and throw detectives of the shooter's trail.

Another type of ammunition commonly used on ranges, because it is environmentally friendly, is frangible ammunition. Frangible ammunition, or 'exploding' bullets, consists of loosely bonded material that fragments upon impact with the target. They are used on indoor shooting ranges because they have poor penetrating power and will not ricochet upon impact, so they are safer to use in close proximity to people. From a forensic view, frangible bullets fragment so much upon impact that there are no rifling impressions left to be analyzed.


Frangible ammo is made of bonded metal powder which disintegrates on contact.

The final round we will mention is the Glaser Safety Slug. This round consists of a thin copper shell, filled with bird shot, and covered with a plastic nose. The round is billed as “a favorite of air marshals” since it is designed specifically for low penetration (the air marshals do not want to shoot a terrorist and then have the bullet pierce the skin of the airplane while in fight). Upon impact, the thin copper shell peels back, launching the bird shot into the target. The Glaser causes enormous, relatively shallow, soft-tissue injuries. As a forensic investigator, the Glaser does not maintain its integrity well (as designed) and the thin copper shell is prone to fragmentation (as designed) so there is little metal remaining to analyze for rifling.

A separate problem for battlefield detectives are polygonal barrels, which do not use traditional rifling with lands and grooves and leave relatively faint marks on the bullet. Since there are no defined grooves forced into the bullet, it is difficult for someone to match a bullet fired from a weapon with a polygonal barrel (Glock, Steyr, and Heckler and Koch make weapons with polygonal barrels because it increases both barrel life and bullet velocity). The challenges for the forensic examiner multiply if a fragmenting/frangible bullet is fired from a polygonal barrel because even if a readable fragment was recovered, the rifling will be too faint to match.

Polygonal barrels are a problem and so are smoothbore barrels like those of a shotgun. Smoothbore barrels have no rifling and thus leave no marks on an exiting bullet. Michael A. Stone, a professional killer who worked for the Protestant Loyalist paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, often preferred to commit his sectarian murders with a shotgun because he knew the authorities would be unable to trace the shootings to his weapon. Stone was eventually caught after a particularly audacious assault at an IRA funeral, but he was never connected to his shotgun killings through forensic evidence.

All the time a forensic examiner spends sweating over a microscope, carefully matching one bullet with another, is for naught if the shooter changes/discards their barrel after firing the round. For example, the barrels in automatic pistols from Glock and Sig Saur are designed to be changed out it mere seconds so they can be easily replaced. This means after firing a bullet, the barrel can be taken out and destroyed, thus removing the connection between the weapon and the bullet. Someone may be able to connect the bullet to the barrel, but not the barrel to the weapon. Or, after a period of use, a barrel can be drilled out so there are no more lands left so a bullet cannot be matched to it.

IRA shooters were acutely aware of this forensic problem because British authorities took exhaustive measures to recover, analyze, and catalogue each and every bullet left behind after an IRA shooting. Consequently, when British forces recovered a suspected IRA weapon, they compared test bullets from captured weapons with their collection of recovered bullets. This thorough forensic work connected many a suspected IRA member with a particular weapon to a specific shooting, resulting in prison sentences for those implicated in these crimes. In one particular breach of forensic security, an IRA member was captured with a rifle used in over a dozen shootings. Even if this person was not responsible for all of the shootings, he certainly took the fall for them. This prisoner now became especially vulnerable to pressure to reveal the real shooters' identities if he ever wanted to see life outside of prison again.

Shell Casings

Shell casings are as incriminating as the bullets themselves, although the link to the shooter is harder to establish. Cartridges fired in a weapon become unique for several reasons. First, a weapon leaves scrape marks along the outer walls of the casing as it is forced into the chamber (remember, most shell casings are made out of soft brass). Even if the bullet is not fired, the mere act of chambering a round leaves microscopic, identifiable marks on the casing. Then, when the firing pin hits the primer face, it leaves a unique, microscopically identifiable indentation that can be detected by a microscope and then matched to a specific weapon.

Next, as the round is fired, the shell is forced back against the breech face due to the recoil. This impact on the breech face leaves unique, microscopically identifiable marks on the bottom of the cartridge. Then, once again, as the shell is ejected (either automatically or by manipulation of the bolt action) the bolt extractors leave more marks on the shell casing, connecting the cartridge to that exact weapon. The only weapons free from extractor marks are those that do not have an extractor, like a revolver or a weapon with a break-open action. While the cartridges from these weapons are free of extractor marks, they still have the other unique, identifiable marks.

These .223 brass cases have unique ejector marks.

With shell casings, the incriminating link to the shooter takes more effort because after investigators connect a spent bullet with a specific weapon, they have to compare the casings to that same weapon in order to make a definite bullet-weapon-casing link. In this case, the weapon is the common element connecting the bullet and casing. If the casing from a weapon is found on a suspected guerrilla’s person or property, the link from the shooting to the person is complete. However, investigators still cannot prove a specific bullet was fired from a specific shell casing.

Shell casings are informative in other ways. Finding an expended casing reveals the caliber of the weapon and if it is a pistol or a rifle. This information can lead to the country of origin and the manufacturer of the weapon (and the origin of the ammunition). Hence, finding an expended .308 caliber casing made by the Federal Cartridge Company suggests the weapon that fired it was an American rifle and the person firing it may be American as well.

Where a casing is found is equally illuminating for the investigator. The physical location of a casing shows where the shooter was when they made their shot, thus revealing the shooter’s tactics and their technical ability. For example, a casing found in a building 800 meters from the target indicates a shooter with unusual technical shooting ability. A casing found in a car indicates the shooter prefers to use a vehicle for a shooting platform as opposed to a building.

In sum, shell casings are another incriminating link in the chain of evidence that can lead to the capture and conviction of the sniper. Most common criminals know this as do guerrillas who cannot afford to be captured with casings in their possession or on their property. Experienced shooters never leave casings behind after a shooting and dispose of them immediately after an operation. To tie this subject in with an historical example, a lack of shell casing discipline revealed many things about the JFK assassination, to include the location of certain sniper teams and evidence Lee Harvey Oswald did not fire from the Texas School Book Depository.

Magazines

Magazines left behind at the scene of a shooting are as revealing as leaving shell casings behind. A quick look at a magazine indicates the exact kind of weapon that was fired from a particular location, revealing if the weapon fired was an AK-47 or an M-16. Microscopic inspection of the magazine can match the markings on the magazine with the magazine well and release mechanism of the particular weapon used. However, this matching works best if the magazine was only inserted into a single weapon. If the magazine was loaded into multiple weapons, now leaving multiple marks, positive identification to a single weapon becomes difficult.

Fingerprints

While a weapon’s unique extraction system, firing pin, and rifling is the weapon’s fingerprint, actual fingerprints from the firer are also incriminating. (Remember, investigators eventually “discovered” Lee Harvey Oswald’s palm print on the barrel of the supposed murder weapon, underneath the actual stock of the weapon.) The shooter’s fingerprints can be left not only on the weapon itself, but on the above mentioned magazines and shell casings. This incriminating identification makes the use of gloves a necessity for the shooter to break the link of their unseen fingerprints left on a physical item used in the shooting. This basic understanding of incriminating evidence through fingerprints is understood by most professional criminals in the world and is solved by simply wearing gloves.

IRA shooters habitually wore gloves, some even using surgical gloves, to prevent their fingerprints showing up on their weapons. As mentioned in the IRA's counter-forensics manual, microscopic fibers from the gloves used in a shooting may be left on the weapon, requiring the gloves to be destroyed after the operation. Fingerprints can be found elsewhere too. Did the person who loaded the bullets into the weapon magazine wear gloves? Did they inadvertently leave fingerprints on the unexpended cartridges in the magazine or on the magazine itself? The shooter themselves may be clean of fingerprints, but someone else in the shooting process may have exposed themselves.

A forensic technician dusts a revolver used in a crime for fingerprints.

DNA

DNA collected from any number of means is a particularly damning link in the chain of evidence because it positively identifies a particular human being. Items like hair follicles, skin particles, saliva, ear wax, and blood can irrefutably connect an individual to a shooting. These repositories of DNA can be transferred to a crime scene any number of ways. For example, a person's hair and skin is left on almost everything they physically touch or brush up against in an unprotected manner. Also, a person waiting in a sniper position for extended periods may urinate on the ground, leaving an incriminating link through their body waste. Or a person may spit chewing tobacco on the ground at a sniper hide, leaving a DNA link to them.

One Iraqi insurgent sniper, firing from a van (we read about this in the Juba chapter), shot an American soldier at a vehicle checkpoint and was hit with accurate return fire, wounding the sniper in the foot. Even though the wounded sniper fled the scene and hid in a nearby building, it was easy for the American soldiers to follow the blood stains left from his foot and then capture the sniper. In this case, blood stains were not used in forensic analyses, but as simple spoor to track down the wounded sniper.

Physical Clues

Physical damage to a shooter’s body offers more clues for the investigator. For example, a high-powered rifle may leave a bruise or a mark on the firer’s shoulder. Russian forces in Chechnya understood this and routinely checked the shoulders of suspected insurgents to see if they fired a weapon recently. A bruise on the shoulder is only a clue, but it will get the suspected Chechen guerrilla an all-expense paid trip to a filtration camp just to be sure. Also, a novice shooter (and even some veteran shooters) may fire a rifle with their head too close to their scope. When the rifle fires and jerks back from the recoil, the scope can hit the shooter above the eye, leaving a nasty, semi-circular cut in the eyebrow area. Anyone who has been around sniper rifles for a while will instantly recognize this unique wound for what it is.

Another relatively common type of injury is having a shooter’s hand ‘get bit’ when working the action on their weapon. This is a more common occurrence when handling pistols. When the pistol’s action slides forward, the slide may catch a small piece of skin at the webbing of the hand or even on one of the fingers, making a small cut. People that handle and shoot weapons frequently may have these small cuts on their hands. Again, this does not prove one’s guilt, but it is an indicator which may place a shooter under unwanted scrutiny. These cuts become a real problem if skin and blood samples are left on the action of the weapon, providing an incriminating DNA link from the weapon to the shooter. Or if a shooter does get a cut above their eye from their scope, their blood will be left on the scope itself, providing an irrefutable DNA link from the shooter to their weapon.

Gunshot Residue (GSR)

As discussed in depth by the IRA's counter-forensic manual, gunshot residue (GSR) produces a serious forensic problem. Imagine a person firing a rifle, with their head next to the action of the weapon; their entire head and face will be covered in a cloud of GSR. The GSR will settle on a person's clothes, in their hair, in their ears, nostrils, eyebrows, under their nails, and all over the weapon itself. Dogs can be trained to sniff out and detect GSR and a variety of companies manufacture portable GSR wipe kits that change colors when they are rubbed up against GSR. Only an immediate, thorough, post-operation clean-up will remove this GSR from the shooter's clothing and body.

Burning a shooter's clothing is common after an operation as is taking a long bath where every inch of a person is cleaned with soap and water. The IRA was very GSR conscious and trained their shooters to clean themselves after an operation. One should also remember using a sound suppressor helps to contain the majority of the GSR propelled out of the barrel of the weapon. A person using a suppressed weapon is likely to have little or any GSR left on their person after a shooting. *(Author's note: since GSR can be found in common household items like paint, false positive reads are common and thus these tests often carry little weight in the court of law. For example, GSR tests carried little weight in the Iraqi legal system.)*

Auditory Evidence

FORENSIC SERVICES UNIT
POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

The greatest threat to the urban guerrilla sniper is a competent, motivated, trained team of crime scene investigators and forensic experts.

photo by PSP

An often overlooked aspect of sniper forensics is the auditory evidence that can be used to identify a specific weapon. This capability is becoming more common in such places as American cities where civilian law enforcement agencies use a series of remote audio systems to detect gunshots in crime-infested areas. Armies are also starting to use acoustical devices on their vehicles to detect gunshots so enemy snipers can be rapidly found and taken out. These acoustical detection devices are a threat to the sniper because they can determine the location of the sniper by analyzing the sound of the gunshot and coming up with a back azimuth of the incoming bullet. Audio recording devices are also capable of capturing a specific gun's audio signature whose graphic representation can then be examined by an auditory specialist in order to match a recorded gunshot to a specific weapon. (This auditory problem is discussed further in the chapters on sound suppressors and counter-sniper methods.)

A Counter-Forensic Perspective

A guerrilla sniper will try to defeat or delay an investigation by using good sniper tactics and will in fact choose their firing position based on counter-forensic principles, not traditional ideas of immediate survival. With a counter-forensic mindset, the sniper uses the urban terrain in such a way making it difficult or impossible for crime scene investigators to find out exactly where they fired from. This is why so many Chechen, IRA, PLO, and Iraqi snipers fired from urbanized areas so security forces were overwhelmed by the number of possible sniper positions and gave up on finding them. If security forces cannot find the sniper’s nest, then they have nothing to investigate. At worst, experienced snipers use the urban terrain in such a manner investigators are delayed in finding their firing position so the shooter has time to forensically sterilize their position.

From a counter-forensic perspective, the more distance a shooter places between themselves and the target, the harder it is to catch them. For one, it is harder for security forces and bystanders to identify the source of the fire. At extreme distances it is difficult to see the muzzle flash and hear the gunshot from the weapon. Distance helps in other ways, by eliminating the association between the target and the sniper. If the sniper is so far away from their victim the people near the sniper cannot even see the target and do not even know someone was shot, they will not be alert to suspicious activity in their area – in other words, the shooter will remain invisible. From the investigator’s side, the increased distance means they have to consider a staggering variety of options: which one of the hundreds of buildings, thousands of doors and windows, and thousands of cars did the shot come from? And which one of these thousands of hostile people actually know something about the shooting?

Identity Security

It is true effectively concealing the muzzle flash, muzzle blast, the sound of the gunshot, and the angle of the shot will prevent identification of the sniper’s position, thus buying the sniper time. These are not the only considerations. The skilled sniper is also concerned with eyewitnesses or security cameras that can identify them during their sniping operation. A sniper cannot remain anonymous if their face is plastered across the evening news and on rewards posters at the local market. Once a sniper’s physical identity is revealed, government security forces have the advantage and can use their resources to track down their now-exposed target.

To limit this possibility of exposure, guerrilla snipers intentionally move into and out of their firing sites in a natural manner that raises no suspicion. This means the sniper tries to look and act like everyone else in the area. Ruses such as dressing like a police officer, a soldier, or other kind of public employee provide a good cover for a sniper’s movement before and after their operation. Furthermore, experienced guerrillas have a credible cover story already prepared so if they talk to anyone, the sniper’s story appears uninteresting and is quickly forgotten (like the DC snipers telling inquisitive police officers they were just in the area visiting family).

The sniper understands they cannot allow themselves to be seen actually pulling the trigger. To do this, the sniper achieves relative isolation. That means the sniper shoots from inside a room, or inside a vehicle, so they may still have people near them but, inside that protective space, there is no one who can physically see the sniper pull the trigger. The sniper protects their physical identity and actions in other ways such as firing from an area where there are no people, like a bombed-out building, or by operating at night where the shooter cannot be seen because of the darkness or because people are inside for the night because of a government enforced curfew.

Ukraine's military intelligence agency (HUR) actively looks for Russian snipers who reveal themselves on social media. It is relatively common for Russian paramilitary groups and the Chechens to shitpost on venues like Telegram to troll the Ukrainians. However, this identifies the sniper and gives them a reputation. In July 2025, the Ukrainians killed Russian sniper Megen Budaev call sign "Tungus" and then spread this news widely online.

Other measures include wearing a disguise, like a wig, or using commonly worn items to hide their features like a hat, scarf, and sunglasses. IRA shooters wore balaclavas, ski masks, and full-face motorcycle helmets to cover their faces. Guerrillas across the Middle East cover their faces with their head scarves and Chechen guerrillas often mimicked their Russian foe, wearing a variety of head nets and balaclavas. Guerrillas also intentionally employ their snipers in areas where the sniper is not from, so if the sniper's face is seen, eye-witnesses will not know who they are.

If the guerrilla sniper conducts their attack from an area that supports them, then concealing their identity may not be an issue. A Chechen rebel shooting a Russian soldier in Grozny, an insurgent shooting an American in Fallujah, an IRA sniper targeting a British soldier in Belfast, or a Hamas gunman targeting an Israeli in the Gaza Strip, may not have to worry about the local population exposing them because the people support their actions.

Operational Signature

One thing investigators can study about a sniper in the absence of any incriminating physical evidence is their operational pattern. Humans are creatures of habit and often conduct repetitive activities because it is easier to do something they know than to repeatedly operate in the unknown. No matter how good a guerrilla sniper is technically and tactically, they often set a predictable pattern. A sniper who is comfortable working a specific neighborhood is setting a pattern. A sniper who only fires from a van is setting a pattern. Security forces use these established patterns to build a profile so they can set a trap or at least be conscious of the sniper’s habits and favorite shooting platforms.

A smart sniper develops several different profiles with several different sets of habits so not to create an easily recognized pattern. For instance, the sniper can develop a methodology used for firing from vehicles, a methodology for firing from occupied buildings, and a methodology for firing at night from wooded areas. The sniper then mixes theses methodologies at random so as not to create a pattern. Even in Stalingrad, Vassili Zaitsev and his snipers were conscious about setting a pattern and intentionally changed their tactics to deceive the Germans to survive another day.

Forensics Investigation as a Counter-Insurgency Tool

In a guerrilla war, a competent team of forensic investigators who can read a crime scene and reverse-engineer a shooting is the sniper’s greatest foe. An experienced sniper detective is in fact more effective than an entire battalion of heavy artillery or a squadron of helicopter gunships. The battlefield detective is dangerous to the guerrilla because they are discriminating and have the tools and know-how to pluck a single guerrilla fish from the ocean of people without destroying the urban infrastructure or killing innocent people. Of even more importance is in the way an investigative team captures a sniper. Burning up an entire city block with napalm to get a sniper is a quick, satisfying act, but is self-defeating from a counter-insurgency perspective.

However, if investigators identify and capture a sniper through incriminating evidence, they can successfully prosecute the shooter through the legal system. Prosecuting a sniper through the courts reinforces a sense of due process, justice, and respect for individual rights. In fact, it is important for security forces to make a deliberate show of due process to gain legitimacy with the people. As we know, governments rule a nation because the people give their consent to do so. The more legitimate a government is in the eyes of its people, the less resistance it meets from them. Of course, on occasion, security forces may have to use superior firepower to eliminate a sniper, but this should be a rarity, not the rule. Taking all of this into consideration, a well-trained forensic investigative team is not only effective for counter-sniping, but they are also a good counter-insurgency tool.

Irina Starikova
aka "Bagira"
• From Serbia
• 40 Kills
• Used an SVD

In 2022, Ukrainian armed forces captured "Bagira", a sniper who fought in Donetsk since 2014 and targeted Ukrainian civilians. There is nine years of information to be gained from her capture thorough interrogation.

Chapter 10

Sniper Technology

Counter-Sniper Technology

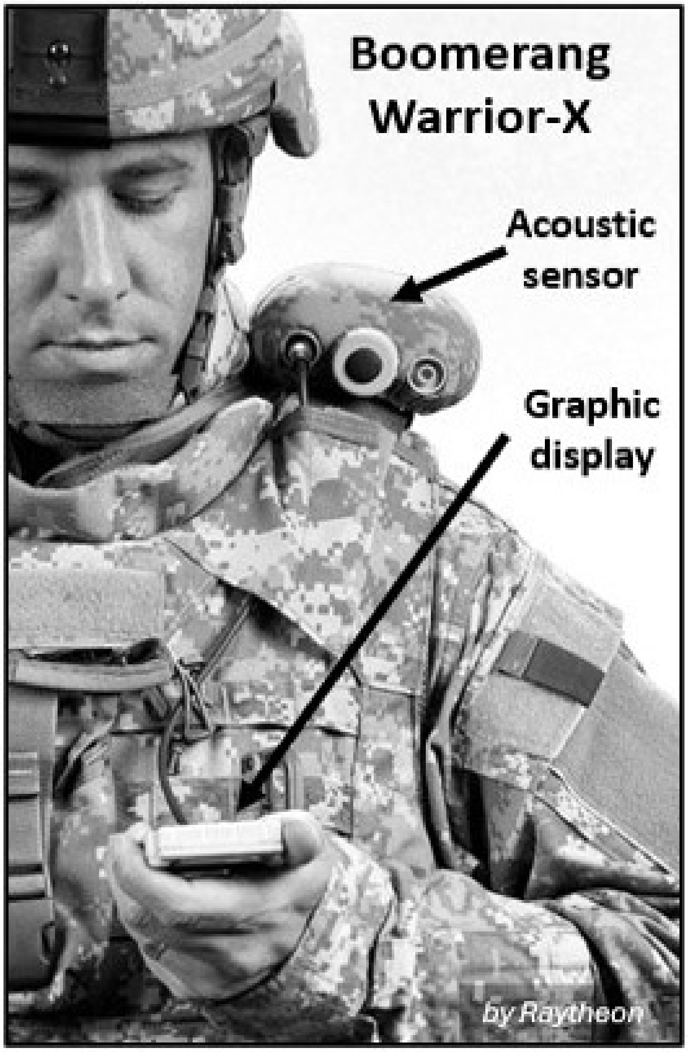
Counter-sniper technology is a relatively new phenomenon. While snipers have existed since the invention of the long musket in 14th Century China, counter-sniper technology is in its infancy, only having been around since the early 1990s. One of the events driving the creation of modern counter-sniper technology was the protracted sniper war in Sarajevo. The UN and NATO forces attempting to enforce various cease fires in the city found they could not detect and counter snipers with any measure of effectiveness. Most of the time, no one knew where an incoming bullet originated from. Other times, the perpetrators were long gone by the time a patrol showed up to investigate. Humans were just too easy to deceive. What was needed was a mechanical device that could not be fooled and would immediately recognize a gunshot and determine where it came from.

Over recent years, various companies have developed technological solutions to the problem posed by urban snipers. We must keep in mind that none of the current counter-sniper systems we are going to review can actually stop a sniper before they shoot. These systems are designed to quickly and accurately locate a sniper after they have fired a shot. Thus, the information acquired by the machines enables the persons targeted by the sniper to react quickly enough to kill or capture the shooter after the shot is already made.

Acoustic Counter-Sniper Technology

The most commonly used counter-sniper systems are those based on acoustical technology. The basic premise of these systems is several acoustic sensors, arrayed in different locations in the same general area, will detect supersonic bullet shock waves and a weapon’s muzzle blast. The acoustic sensors immediately record the sound data from the weapon and feed this information to a computer that determines the trajectory of the bullet and tells the operator from what direction and distance the weapon was fired from. Some systems, based on the variations in the sound waves detected, can even determine the caliber of the round fired. Acoustic counter-sniper systems are designed in several formats: ground mounted, vehicle mounted, and soldier mounted.

In field testing, acoustic systems have detected a gunshot from the waves of the muzzle blast and the shock waves of the supersonic bullet and have accurately determined the caliber of the bullets fired. Furthermore, in the majority of shots made during said testing, acoustic systems did accurately determine the correct azimuth of the shot, the correct trajectory and elevation of the shot, and the distance to the shot, all within several degrees of error. Testing revealed it was harder to determine the location of the shooter from muzzle blast alone, especially from a great distance. In contrast, the shock waves emitted along the trajectory of the bullet itself were more reliable.



One of the most popular acoustic systems is the Boomerang, created by BBN Technologies.

BBN has a contract with the U.S. government and the U.S. military currently uses Boomerang counter-sniper systems in Iraq and Afghanistan. BBN said this about their Boomerang system: “Boomerang uses passive acoustic detection and computer based signal processing to locate the shooter. When mounted on a vehicle, the system operates when the vehicle is stationary or moving. Boomerang uses a single mast mounted, compact array of microphones to detect incoming fire. And Boomerang is the only shooter detector shown to operate successfully in urban terrain (MOUT) on moving vehicles. Boomerang detects incoming supersonic small arms fire for bullet trajectories passing the mast, and for shooters firing at maximum effective weapons’ ranges.”

“It detects and reports incoming fire and the relative shooter position (including elevation) quickly. Boomerang indicates the azimuth of incoming small-arms fire by actuating a light to show the clock direction, and Boomerang announces that direction using a recorded voice. Boomerang indicates the range and elevation on an LED screen display. The lighted displays can be dimmed. [Boomerang] worked great for the Marines on post when they received fire from multiple directions [and] when just a few rounds are fired. [Without Boomerang] it is difficult to pinpoint where you’re getting shot at from in an urban environment because of the echoes from the buildings and within the post.”

In 2010, Raytheon developed the Boomerang Warrior-X (BWX), a man-portable system weighing just 11 ounces consisting of an earpiece to receive warnings and a small display. The display provides the range, azimuth and elevation of the shooter relative to the soldier. In 2020, Raytheon integrated the BWX Soldier Gunshot Detection System with the Android Awareness Kit (ATAK) which was further integrated with the military’s main mobile battlefield network software used in TOCs (Tactical Operation Centers).

Each system costs an average of $5,000.00 apiece.

Other fixed outdoor acoustic gunshot detection systems (AGDS) like ShotSpotter and SENTRI have been used extensively in American urban centers by law enforcement agencies to detect gunshots, apprehend suspects, and recover incriminating evidence. Indoor detection systems like the ones made by AmberBox are increasingly being used for large indoor venues with high security requirements like airports. Conceptually, acoustic sensors detect a gunshot, immediately send this data to a processing center which then alerts police and/or a nearby camera system for near real time video coverage of the event. However, for these systems to be effective they must be used on a large scale to cover the area of interest so multiple systems can detect the same event.

How Effective are Acoustic Gunshot Detection Systems (AGDS)?

In the U.S., 80% of urban gunfire goes unreported meaning the events happen but people don’t notify the police via 911 so law enforcement are unable to respond.

With AGDS, police are aware of the events and thus respond to a higher volume of identified gunshots. With an integrated system police are aware of a gunshot event, respond faster, go to the correct location, and are able to recover evidence. In theory, AGDS implementation should deter gun violence due to higher shooter arrest rates, gun confiscation, and increased conviction rates from improved evidence recovery. However, studies addressing nine different geographic locations from 1999-2020 revealed no significant reduction in gun violence.

ShotSpotter
Incident Review Center
by ShotSpotter

A command center receives acoustic data 24/7 for confirmation, analysis, geolocation and officer dispatch.

Accurately identifying where a gunshot occurs depends on several variables to include distance from the shot to the sensor, the caliber of the bullet fired (the larger the caliber the more often it is accurately identified), the number of shots fired and environmental considerations (wind, snow, rain). Depending on the quality of the filtering software, correctly identifying a gunshot as opposed to some other similar loud noise varies resulting in false positives. The location of the gunshot is usually relayed as a grid coordinate and a street address which can be problematic if it identifies a large building like an apartment complex. Overall, AGDS accurately identifies the gunshot location 80% of the time.

In 2021, the Detroit Police Department (DPD) spent $1.5 million on a contract to deploy the ShotSpotter system covering a 6-mile high crime area in overwhelmingly black neighborhoods. This raised issues of racial profiling and privacy from surveillance. In a nine-month period, based on ShotSpotter data, DPD made 64 arrests, recovered over 200 firearms, and collected shall casings from 638 locations (that's 2.3 gunshots per day).

To respond more quickly to these gunshot events, DPD established local surveillance teams near the covered area. DPD claims gun violence has gone down in the covered area with the city requesting another $7 million to expand the program.

However, New York City leadership questioned their own use of ShotSpotter, having spent $54 million on it from 2014-2024. The systems were initially placed to cover high-crime areas in Brooklyn and the Bronx but grew to cover 90 square miles.

An audit of the NYPD found that only 8%-20% of the systems alerts related to confirmed shootings, depending on the month. However, ShotSpotter guarantees that their system will detect 90% of all shootings accurately within 82-feet of the event. The problems NYPD had confirming a shooting included drive-bys, gunmen recovering their shell casings, and lack of corroborating testimony and evidence. On average, it took ShotSpotter just 43 seconds to notify NYPD of a shooting event with NYPD responding in 3 minutes 50 seconds.

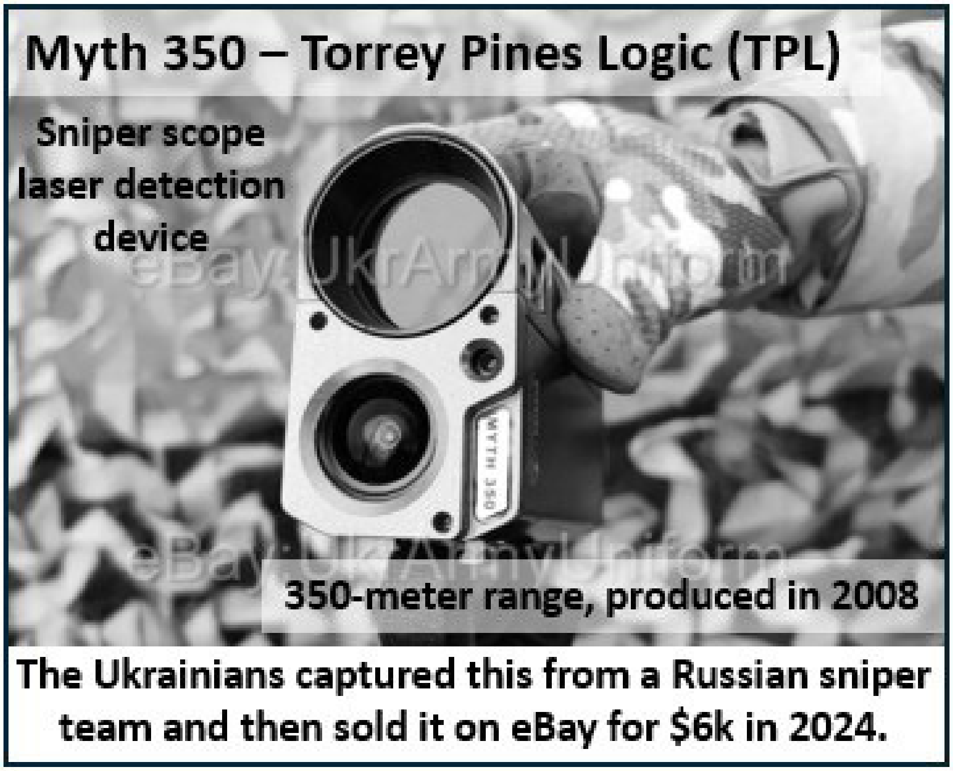
SoundThinking, which owns ShotSpotter, also advocates using their system in conjunction with drone surveillance systems and their License Plate Recognition (LPR) and Advanced Vehicle Recognition (AVR) solutions. The idea is that a drone would immediately fly to an event location to observe, detect and track any vehicles in the area which depart the scene. The vehicle would then be identified with LPR to identify the tags and the owner of the vehicle. Of course, this means the LPR systems would have to be deployed in areas along with ShotSpotter to have an effect. Data collected from the event would then be analyzed by SoundThinking's CaseBuilder Gun Crime

Management system which has access to NIBIN (National Integrated Ballistic Information Network) to help identify, arrest and prosecute the shooters.

The Sniper’s Response to Acoustic Systems

Is there any way to defeat these machines, or is the modern day shooter going to be acoustically detected out of existence? While acoustic counter-sniper systems are the most common, they are also the easiest to defeat. All a sniper has to do to defeat a system dependent on ‘hearing’ a gunshot is to employ a sound suppressor. With a suppressor, there is no muzzle blast to detect. A system like the ShotSpotter, which is deployed in various positions throughout a city, detects gunshots, not the bullet’s invisible shock waves. Consequently, a common sound suppressor purchased on the black market for a hundred dollars (or a homemade one built for half the price) will defeat a multi-million dollar system like the ShotSpotter.

The shooter can exploit counter-sniper machines in other ways to take advantage of the fact that acoustic detection systems are susceptible to changes in the weather, temperatures, and humidity. For instance, a sniper firing a shot in extremely hot weather (like that found in the Middle East) with heat waves rising off of the urban environment’s oven-hot pavement, parking lots, roads, and sidewalks, may remain undetected. This is because the super-hot environment affects the sound and shock waves of the bullet in such a way that increases the acoustic system’s margin of error. The system may detect a gunshot and its supersonic bullet, but it may not be able to pinpoint the exact location the shot was made from.


Myth 350 – Torrey Pines Logic (TPL)
Sniper scope laser detection device
MYTH 350
350-meter range, produced in 2008
eBay: UkrArmyUniform

The Ukrainians captured this from a Russian sniper team and then sold it on eBay for $6k in 2024.

A sniper can defeat attempts to acoustically “fingerprint” their weapon by deceiving the acoustic system’s established templates. Acoustic systems recognize the caliber of weapon fired based on previously recorded noise and shock wave data. In order to throw off the acoustic system, a sniper can hand-load their own rounds in order to change the ballistic characteristics of their bullets. The sniper could also fire a sabot round. In this case, a sniper would fire a 5.56 mm bullet from a 7.62 mm rifle, thus altering the sound and shock wave template already programmed into the acoustic system’s computer.

Importantly, systems like the ShotSpotter’s citywide system only work in a permissive environment where the government and security forces are in control of day to day life. The ShotSpotter is ideal in places like America where the police control the city, not the gangs doing the shootings. However, imagine American security forces setting up a citywide ShotSpotter system in Fallujah or the British in the IRA stronghold of South Armagh, or the Russians in Grozny.

As soon as the insurgents located a ShotSpotter device (which must be camouflaged or hidden to survive) they would destroy them.

The last gunshots the devices would pick up would be the guerrillas shooting them to pieces. And if the ShotSpotter systems all report to a central command post like a police station, what happens when the guerrillas detonate a car bomb in front of the station and collapse the entire structure, destroying the ShotSpotter command center with it? Having a certain counter-sniper technology is not enough. This technology must also be practical and be able to survive in the environments they will be used in.

Optics Laser Reflection Technology

Acoustic technology may be the most common counter-sniper system, but optics laser reflection technology is much less expensive and even strives to be pro-active by detecting a sniper before they ever make a shot. With this technology, a handheld device emits an eye-safe laser out to a range of a kilometer and more. When the laser strikes a layered optics, like a telescopic sight, it sends a reflection of the diffused laser back to the user, pinpointing the location of the enemy. Just like a traditional laser range finder, the device tells the user what the distance is between them and their target. The more sophisticated optics laser reflection devices are even advertised as being able to discriminate between common objects like eyeglasses and can see through smoked glass windows. However, what the user sees is a small white circle indicating the lens which can be hard to discern and there is no guarantee what you are seeing is a sniper scope.

In 2015, Russia began deploying its portable Ironiya optical-electrical surveillance systems in the Donbass for counter-sniper purposes which consisted of a television camera, thermal imager and laser rangefinder. The portable versions weigh just 7 pounds. The system knows its own location and can determine the target’s grid coordinates. Improved versions were used at the start of the Ukraine War in 2022 for detecting enemy positions, calling in airstrikes, and use by sniper teams. The system can record and transmit video for information warfare purposes. These systems and ones like it are seeing increasing use in the Ukrainian War.

The Sniper’s Response to Laser Detection Technology

The sniper has several options for dealing with this threat. First, if the sniper can manipulate the urban terrain so they can make a close shot, around two hundred meters or less, then the sniper can defeat laser detection by simply not using a scope. No scope equals no reflection. Or the sniper can take a “snap” shot. With this, once the sniper sees a target with their naked eye, they raise their weapon from hiding, take aim, acquire the target, make the shot, and lower their weapon...all in the space of several seconds. In this manner, the optics detection team only has a split second to find and locate the exposed optics – an unlikely prospect in a cluttered urban environment.

Since the laser device will pick out all layered optics, it will home in on rifle scopes, binoculars, telescopes, video cameras, still cameras, glasses and sunglasses. A sniper can use this knowledge to their advantage by setting up decoy optics in their operational area to saturate it with false alarms. By doing this, a sniper could smoke out a counter-sniper team by getting them to react to a false alarm. A sniper could use these decoy optics as bait to ambush the counter-sniper team when they go forward to investigate the suspicious optics. To take this a step further, an enemy sniper could set up a stuffed dummy with a scope to get the laser-armed counter-sniper team to take a shot and reveal their location. The tactical options for exploiting the optics laser reflection device are many.

A Russian sniper employs an Ironiya system somewhere in Ukraine, 2023.

Millimeter Wave Technology (MWT)

Although no practical system is presently used, it is possible to detect and track a rifle using radio frequency MWT which receives reflected pulse energy from the gun barrel.

MWT can also be used to track a bullet but it’s difficult since it’s an extremely small object with a traveling time to the target of a second or two at most. Testing shows the average 7.62 mm bullet, if fired from 500 meters away or less, can be tracked with a high-probability of locating the sniper. To date, millimeter-wave radar systems are expensive, complicated, and fragile as compared to other systems. Practical counter-sniper radar systems are still years away from production, although several companies are pursuing them.

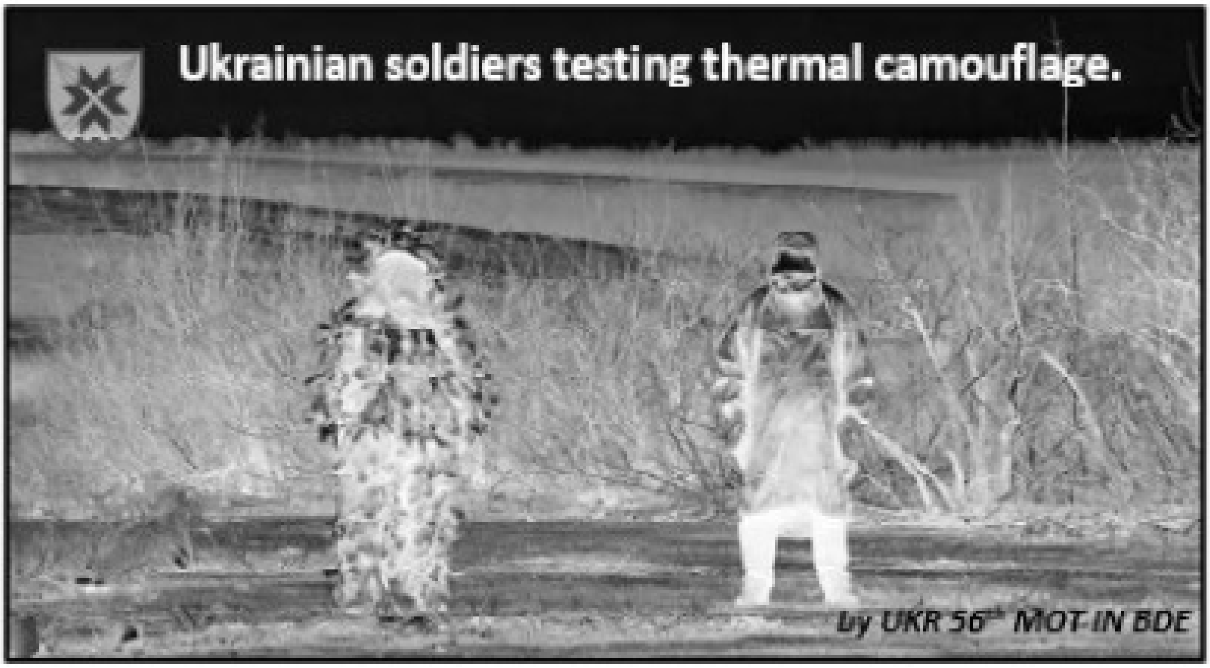
Closed Circuit Television Systems (CCTV)

A common form of technical surveillance used to target criminals is CCTV. CCTV is a system of visible light cameras (IR cameras are also available, but less common) networked together that record specific areas of interest. The cameras transfer what they view to a central location where the operators view real-time activity or review the unseen film at a later time. Visible light cameras have their limitations in that they cannot detect a flying bullet because it is too small and is moving too fast for the camera to pick it up. CCTV is useful for a variety of other tasks like recording the faces, license plates, and movement of criminals as they conduct their operations. As a result, CCTV is generally more useful in post-shooting investigations than as a preventative system.

One nation using CCTV on a large scale is Britain, due in part to the IRA's bombing campaigns during The Troubles. Law enforcement in Britain use CCTV to deter criminal activity, to view real-time events, and to record actions where the film may be used at a later date for criminal investigations and prosecutions. An informal study estimated Britain had approximately 400,000 surveillance cameras positioned throughout the country, with the majority of them focused on public urban areas. This extensive use of surveillance cameras proved useful during the July 7, 2005, London suicide bombings when four men blew themselves up, killing fifty-two people and wounding another seven hundred. CCTV captured pictures of the suicide bombers before the attack, which then aided British authorities in identifying the men during the post-bombing investigation.

CCTV used on a massive scale, as in Britain, causes problems for any organization conducting illegal activities. In CCTV monitored areas, a sniper will have to observe the surrounding camera systems and determine the areas the cameras cover. Consequently, the sniper's first strategy is camera avoidance. If a sniper cannot avoid surveillance, then they will try to avoid being filmed in the act. It is far better to be filmed from afar walking through a crowded area than is to get caught pulling the trigger.

While extensive CCTV systems make a guerrilla's activities difficult, successful operations are still possible. For example, the IRA still conducted effective operations in London despite the presence of cameras. IRA members hid their identity from cameras by using simple ruses like wearing motorcycle helmets, wigs, ball caps, and sunglasses (so facial recognition software programs would not get them). IRA vehicles used for operations either had fake license plates or the cars were stolen (so cameras taking pictures of a car's license plate for running red lights were rendered useless). While under the surveillance of cameras, IRA men mimicked the normal body language of the people around them so they did not trigger a reaction from screen watchers. CCTV definitely made the IRA work harder, but they still exploited the reactive nature of the CCTV system to carry out their operations. CCTV systems have other weaknesses: they can be put of action by cutting their power sources, spray painting their lenses, shooting them out, or blowing up the control room where the cameras are monitored.


Ukrainian soldiers testing thermal camouflage.
by UKR 56th MOT IN BDE

Thermal Detection

Drones with infrared cameras are used widely in the Ukrainian War and a soldier or sniper team must assume that they will at some point be placed under surveillance near the zero line. This means night does not hide a person and their biggest threat is their own heat signature. A way to hide your thermal signature is to dig in underground like a bunker or inside a building. Many have tried to use thermal reflective blanks to hide their signature but there are many flaws with this and it is hard to do, especially when moving. The best tactic is to have your own drones look at you to see if your thermal countermeasures are working. If a sniper team can’t deny the enemy infrared surveillance of them, they are vulnerable targets waiting to get hit with an FPV drone.

Counter-Sniper Technology Limitations

During the DC Snipers' shooting spree in the Washington D.C. area, law enforcement officials attempted to use the Viper Muzzle Flash Detection and Location System to find them. The Viper system was fundamentally flawed because it was based solely on detecting the muzzle flash of a weapon. To be fair, the Viper's IR system was equipped with various filters to limit the number of false alarms and to distinguish a true muzzle flash from other infrared clutter. The problem was that the DC snipers fired the majority of their shots from the trunk of their car so there was no visible muzzle flash. If the Viper system was deployed in a manner where it could operate within its capabilities, Viper would have detected absolutely nothing. In this case, the street savvy tactics of the two shooters outwitted millions of dollars of technology and machinery.

As the DC snipers continued to spread terror despite a massive police presence, a decision was made to employ military assets to try and detect the shooters. Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld authorized the military to use their RC-7 Airborne Reconnaissance Low (ARL) aircraft. There were some legal concerns using the military's RC-7 to help in a domestic criminal case because of possible violation of the 1878 Posse Comitatus Act, which prevents the U.S. military from performing civilian law enforcement. The military got around the law by agreeing that the military personnel operating the plane would only work the surveillance equipment and the police would conduct the analysis and investigative follow up.

DHC-7/RC-7 ARL
UNITED NATIONS
UN
C-FJHQ
Airborne Reconnaissance Low

USMIL's ARL was incapable of detecting the DC snipers and was not appropriate for a dense urban area.

The RC-7 never detected the snipers in the act. This is because the RC-7 suffered from the same limitations as the Viper system. The RC-7 relied primarily on IR imaging to detect a muzzle blast from a weapon and therefore had no better chance of detecting the needle in the haystack than did the Viper. And the fact the RC-7 had powerful cameras capable of reading a license plate from its orbit and then transmit this detailed imagery to users on the ground also was of no use. If the RC-7 did not know where to look and point its sensors, then it was out of luck. Once again, because the DC snipers fired a single shot, at random, throughout a large geographic area made up of a dense urban environment, the military's multi-million dollar surveillance plane, which worked great in the open waters against drug runners in cigarette boats, was useless against a lone shooter firing from the trunk of an old beat up Caprice Classic.

Remote Sniper Technology

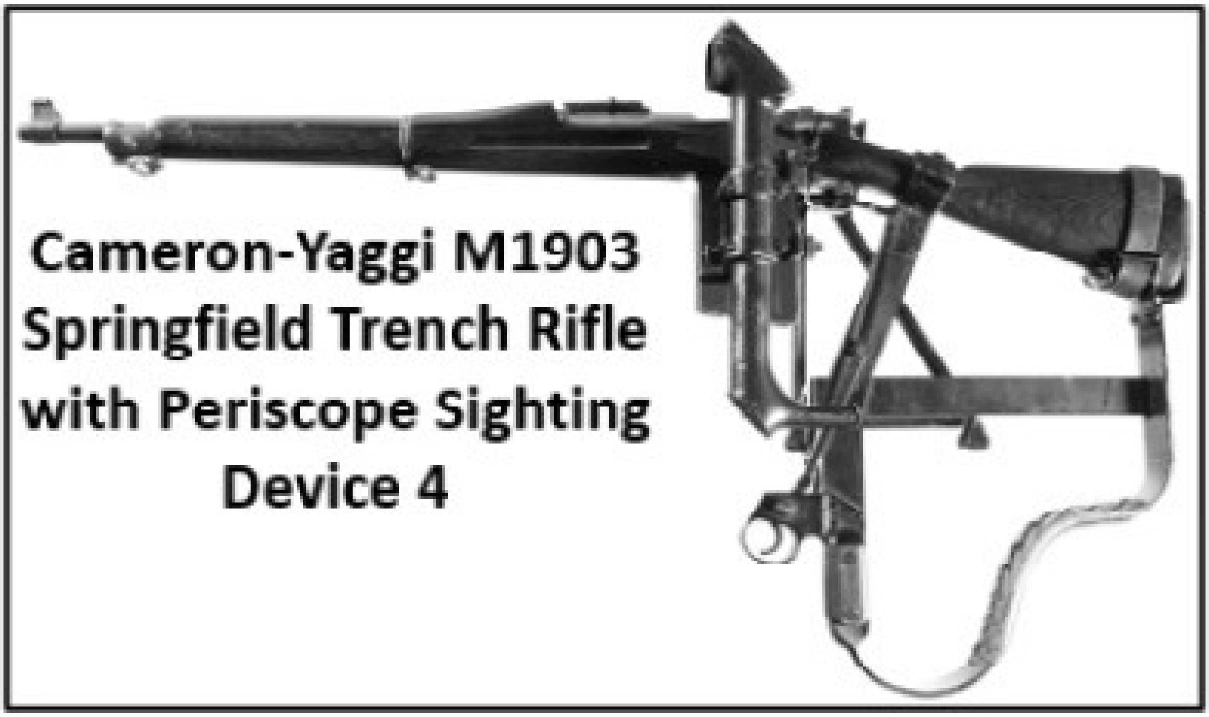
The need for a remote sniping capability was recognized as far back as World War I. During the Great War, deadly German snipers, working from the cover of their muddy trench systems, made daily life in the Allied trenches hazardous. Even if an allied sniper carefully poked their rifle and part of their head over the parapet of their dugouts to observe the German lines, they still ran the risk of taking a bullet in the face from a waiting German marksman. No matter what the allied snipers did, they still had to expose themselves to some degree just to look down the sights of their weapon. What was the answer to this problem, where the very act of aiming your rifle was a death sentence?

As early as 1915, Allied troops developed a system to protect themselves from the always-scanning German snipers. This invention was the periscope rifle. Specifically, one Sergeant William Beech, an Australian soldier who fought in the gruesome trenches of Gallipoli, developed a version of the periscope rifle. In the same year, the French also created a version of the periscope rifle. There were different models of the periscope rifle, but they all had the same basic design, which included a frame to hold a rifle above the trenches, a periscope so the shooter could remain in the trenches but still look over the rifle’s sights through the periscope’s mirrors, and a method of remotely pulling the rifle’s trigger. Some historians credit two Americans with developing the periscope rifle, although it is more accurate to say they developed a version of the periscope rifle.

Even though the United States did not enter World War I until 1917, many Americans believed they would eventually be dragged into the horrible conflict and some were actively preparing for such an eventuality. Such men included James L. Cameron and Lawrence E. Yaggi, two avid riflemen from Ohio. They were following the events of the Great War and understood what a deadly menace enemy snipers presented. Their answer to this problem was the periscope rifle. The two created a metal frame a rifle sat in, there was a periscope attached to it, and levers for working the bolt-action of the rifle and the trigger. With this system, the rifle and frame sat on the shoulders of the shooter, above their head, so the weapon could be fired without any exposure to the enemy.

Once they had a working model of their invention, they traveled across the Atlantic in order to present their design to the British and French soldiers locked in combat with the Germans. At the time, the

Allied response to the German sniper threat was to observe the enemy lines with traditional box periscopes. Once they had a target, they would put down the periscope, pick up their rifle, and take their shot. However, the Germans recognized this tactic and could see the sun glint off the box periscopes. In response, the German shooters patiently waited for the Allied sharpshooters to stick their head over the trench with their rifle and then promptly shot them.


Cameron-Yaggi M1903 Springfield Trench Rifle with Periscope Sighting Device 4

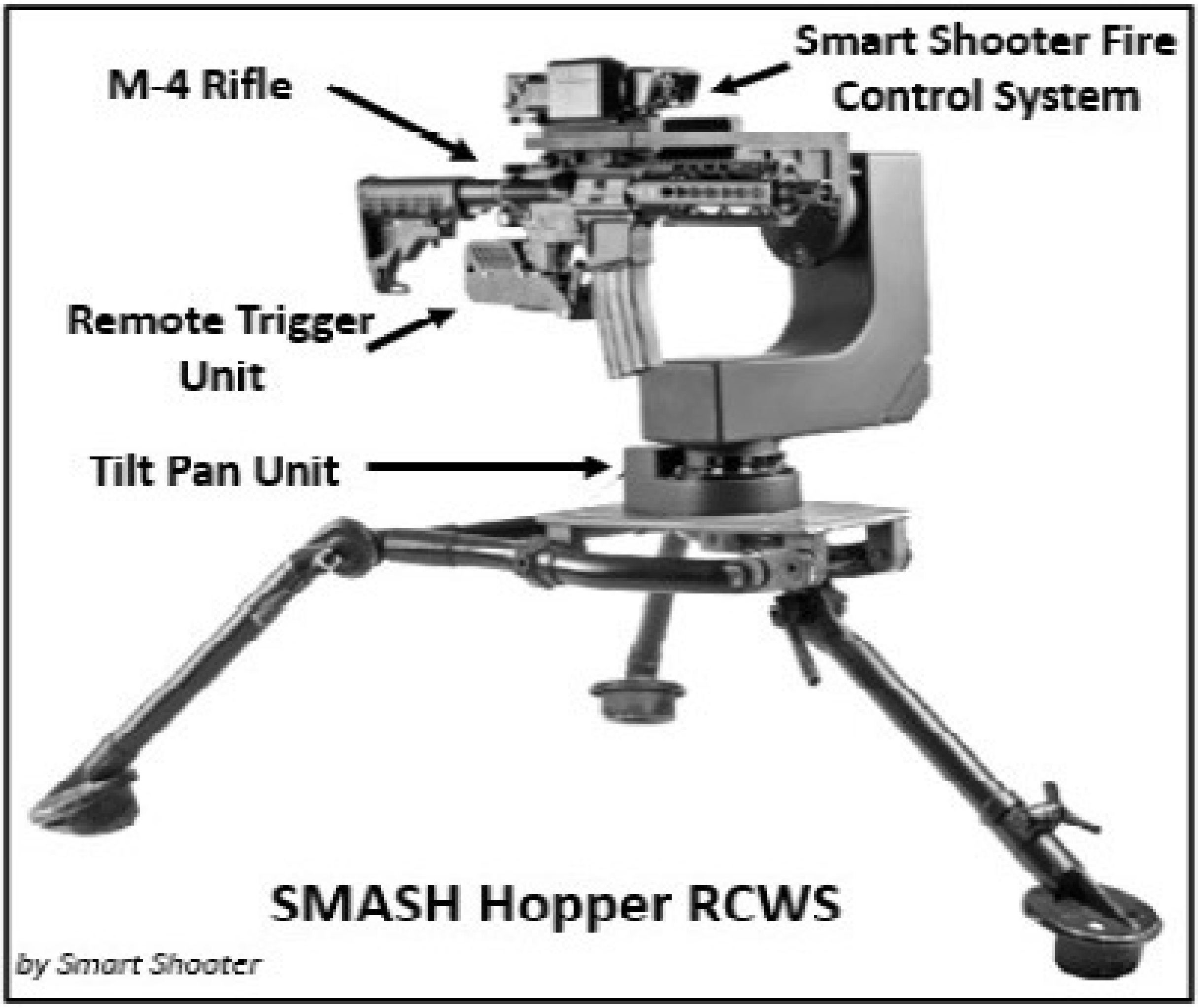
The two inventors took advice from these combat veterans and further refined their system. Following guidance from the United States Ordnance Department, the two inventors had to create a device that did not require any “significant or permanent” alterations to the standard U.S. service rifle - the Springfield M1903 bolt-action rifle. In the end, Cameron and Yaggi produced a lightweight metal frame weighing only six pounds. The weight of the frame was actually advantageous since it dampened the recoil of the rifle and made follow on shots easier.

The most important piece of the entire design was the periscope sight, which was called a “sightascope.” The sightascope was a stable device as it was securely attached by screws to the left side of the rifle’s stock. Different from the earlier French and Australian designs, the sightascope was its own aiming device and did not require the shooter to look over the rifle’s sights - it was an independent scope. During testing, this system was able to fire ten bullets in a 1.3 inch group at two hundred yards. Importantly, after hearing from the French and British veterans, the visible lenses of the sightascope were recessed so light would not reflect off them. While this system performed admirably during America’s short experience in the war, as soon as the conflict ended, interest for the Cameron-Yaggi design quickly disappeared and the invention was all but forgotten.

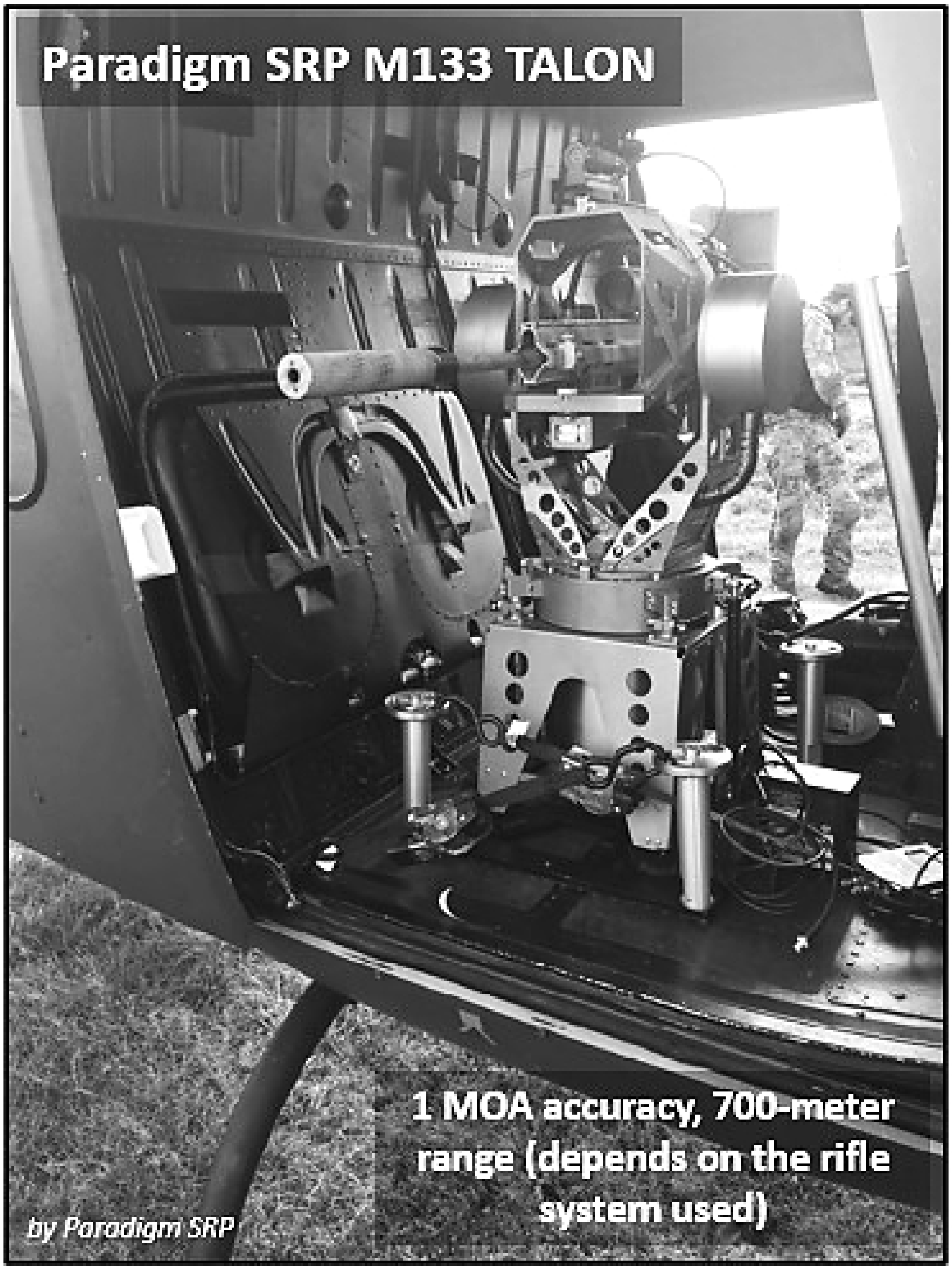
Modern Technology

Today, there is still a need for remote sniping as seen by the grinding WWI conditions on Ukraine’s eastern front. In fact, some Ukraine soldiers have constructed their own periscope rifles using AK-47s. However, the technology is already available to conduct truly remote sniping but only a few countries have pursued this and have made the conceptual leap (U.S., Israel). Remotely Controlled Weapon Systems (RCWS) are available either through professional manufacturers or homemade designs.

In 1997, Precision Remotes, Inc (PRI) began designing remotely operated weapons systems (ROWS) and their Telepresent Rapid Aiming Platform (TRAP). However, the U.S. military remained focused on testing remote platforms for machine-guns instead of sniper systems. Even though PRI developed their T-2 TRAP that could remotely fire any variety of 7.62 mm semi-automatic rifle systems, USMIL remained uninterested. Undeterred, PRI produced their TRAP T192 Remote Sniper Kit in 2013, a battery or solar operated RCWS firing the M82 Barret .50 weighing only 46 pounds with the weapon. IEC Infrared Systems LLC bought PRI in 2012 and continued to manufacture ROWS with a focus on mounting light machine-guns although a rifle can be installed as well.


Smart Shooter Fire Control System
M-4 Rifle
Remote Trigger Unit
Tilt Pan Unit
SMASH Hopper RCWS
by Smart Shooter

While PRI didn’t gain any traction with their designs, other companies moved in with Israeli-owned Smart Shooter designing RCWS as early as 2013. Their first product was their rifle optics system which was designed to be a fire control system (FCS) in that it calculates environmental conditions like wind, humidity and distance. The optics computer can lock onto moving targets and then calculate when the shooter should pull the trigger, giving them a 95% hit probability. This technology raises the idea of the “Universal Sniper” in that anyone with the system can make skilled shots which before only a very experienced shooter with many hours of range time and thousands of shots could possibly make.


Paradigm SRP M133 TALON
1 MOA accuracy, 700-meter range (depends on the rifle system used)
by Paradigm SRP

Smart Shooter then developed their Smash Hopper Light Tripod system which became available in 2020. This system consisted of their FCS, an assault rifle (5.56 mm or 7.62 mm), a pan-tilt unit, a tripod, and a power source (battery). The total weight, depending on the rifle system, was about 110 pounds. Because of its size and weight, it was designed for a static defensive role such as a base or a hard facility. The main limitation with the system is that it uses a standard rifle which has to have its magazine replaced by hand to reload the weapon. The company also makes a scaled down version called the SMASH Hopper Light weighing about 20 pounds (plus the weapon) for “covert” operations.

In 2018, American company Paradigm SRP with headquarters in Texas developed a gyro-stabilized RCWS designed to be fired from ground, maritime, or aerial platforms. Importantly, their technology can stabilize the system on a moving platform to guarantee 1 MOA accuracy. During testing, the company was able to consistently make 700 meter headshots with their M133 TALON when firing from a helicopter. The system weighs 60 pounds and can mount any weapon system from 5.56 mm to a Barrett .50. From an aerial counter-sniper perspective the implications are profound as any rooftop shooters (a common tactic in the Middle East) can be targeted. Today, a European national counter-terrorism unit employs the M133 for aerial urban counter-sniping operations and other duties in large cities.

Drone Snipers

While shooting accurately from a helicopter provides an effective aerial platform, why not just use a drone? A helicopter is expensive and there is considerable risk of it getting shot down, depending on the operational environment. For example, in the ongoing Ukraine War, helicopters on both sides don’t fly anywhere near the zero line because the anti-aircraft threat is so high and nothing beats a Stinger. On the other hand, a relatively inexpensive drone can be flown anywhere because there is no risk to the operator and the entire system is disposable. Also, in an urban area in a non-warzone environment, a drone-mounted precision weapon can provide a unique capability for counter-terrorist and hostage recue situations.

The Israeli company Duke Robotics was founded in 2014 to manufacture robotic stabilization products for military applications.

The company produced its first stabilizer in 2016 which was subsequently used to weaponize their TIKAD drone. The system was subsequently tested by the Israeli army. In 2021, Duke Robotics partnered with the Israeli company Elbit Systems who is the primary manufacturer of traditional unmanned aerial drones (UAVs) for the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). The primary characteristic of the stabilizer is that it absorbs the recoil of the attached rifle and then quickly returns it to the previous stabilized state. Other competing drone and rifle designs didn’t have a system to compensate for weapon recoil and thus the entire drone was destabilized during the firing process.

In 2022, Smart Shooter released pictures and videos of their SMASH Dragon drone equipped with a stripped-down M4 assault rifle and their proprietary fire control system. The system had an in-line recoil management system that worked well and allowed for rapid shooting while staying on target. The same year the company partnered with Israeli company Steadicopter to place its RCWS on it Rotary Unmanned Aerial Systems (RUAS) which were scaled-down helicopters providing greater range (150 km), stability, and sensor suites. Combined, this provided a long-range day/night precision strike capability.

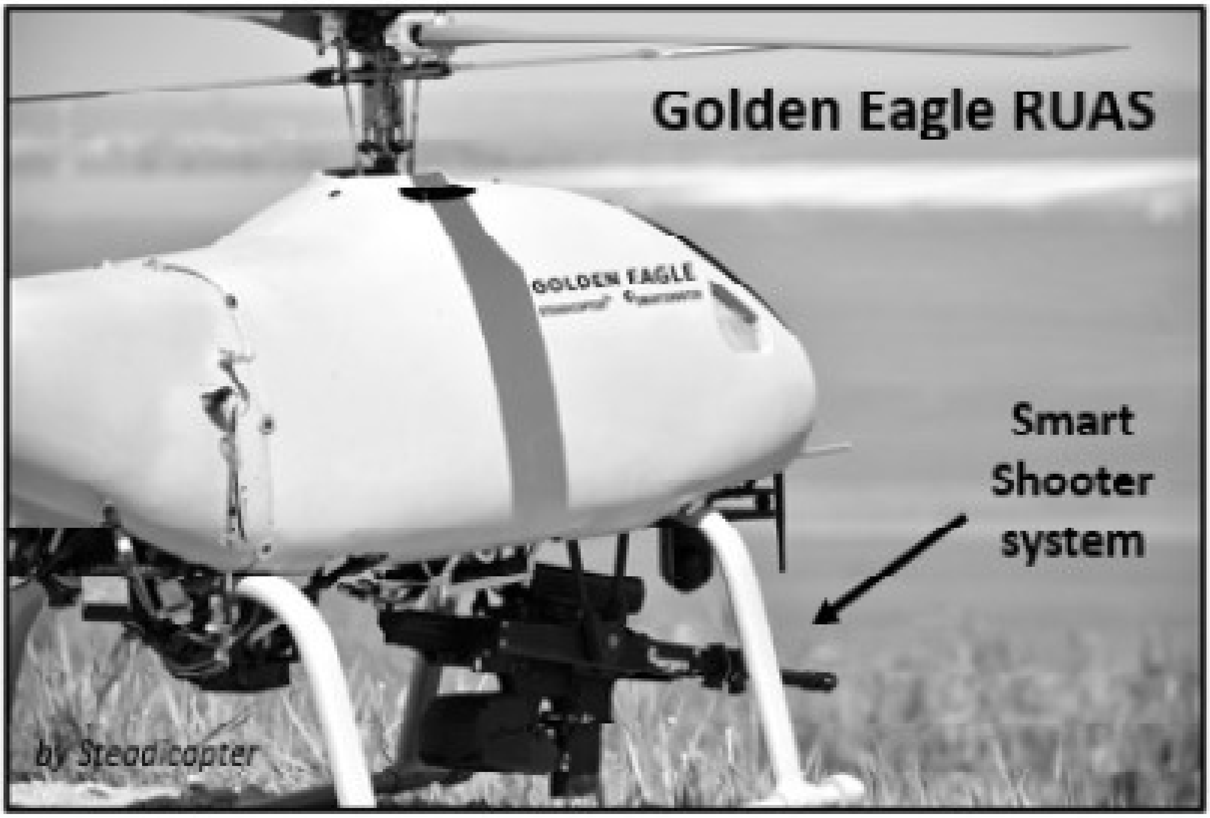
By 2024, reporting indicated Israel has used sniper drones extensively during the Gaza War (2023-2025) to include the targeting of unarmed civilians. While Israel officially denies the use of sniper drones or at least won’t confirm it, their use appears to be common as indicated by interviews with Gazans who refer to the system as “the quadcopter.”

Smart Shooter denies that its product is being used by the Israeli military for operations in Gaza which would raise significant liability issues if it was used outside recognized legal guidelines for wartime conduct.

Since the SMASH system is distinguished by its precision fire control system, targeting noncombatants would have to be intentional.

While Israel was the first nation state to use weaponized sniper-drones in combat the idea is proliferating with other companies. For example, in 2019, Turkish company Asisguard developed their Songar quadcopter drone for the Turkish military with the ability to mount various weapons systems to include a 5.56 mm assault rifle. Although the first drones were delivered in 2020, there is no evidence that they have been used in a warzone. Also, in 2024, Feloni Aero pitched a machine-gun and missile armed drone for use in Ukraine although there is no evidence it has been developed or employed in combat.

We will likely see a continuing proliferation of armed drones as the idea spreads and the systems are tested in combat.



Guerrilla Engineering

Although nation-state manufactures are able to produce the highest quality cutting edge weapon systems, insurgent organizations are able to fabricate their own systems. The IRA had its own weapons manufacturing department, HAMAS ran its own armaments shop in Gaza and the Taliban bought a variety of weapons from traditional unregulated gunsmiths in Pakistan’s FATA region. And let’s not forget that Ronnie Barrett made his first .50 rifle in his garage. Anyone with a home workshop, some tools, and a lathe can fabricate just about anything they want weapon’s-wise.

During the Syrian Civil War (2011-2025), sniping was used widely by all sides as will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. A subset of this sniping was the employment of RCWS fabricated by the various groups of differing quality dependent on a whole host of factors. A study analyzing the use of RCWS by irregular groups in the region from 2011-2016 revealed an effort to develop remotely operated machine-guns and rifles.

For example, the Free Syrian Army fabricated remote sniper systems using a variety of weapons including a 7.62 mm FN FAL with a camera rigged to the scope and controlled through a computer. The Al-Tawhid Brigade (Qatar-backed), ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front (Al Qaeda affiliated) all created similar systems up to .50 in size.

AR1 Assault Rotor Weaponized Drone
by Drones Vision

Sniper drones can also be self-manufactured. All it requires is a remote trigger actuator and a pan/tilt device if you want the weapon to move independently of the drone. The drone’s own camera can be used for targeting or a wireless camera can be attached to a scope to transmit imagery. For instance, Taiwanese company Drones Vision produces their AR1 Assault Rotar Weaponized Drone which is a rudimentary design compared to Smart Shooter’s more advanced system. An underground organization like a drug cartel could easily pay an engineering student and amateur gunsmith to produce a similar product.

Technological advancements are going to continue to impact the modern sniper. While some technology is relatively easy to thwart like acoustic detection systems, others have already made a shooter’s job very difficult if not impossible in some scenarios like drones with infrared cameras. A response to these capabilities can be to employ increasingly sophisticated remote systems which reduce the exposure and thus the risk of the shooter. It may take technology to beat technology.

The Assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh

Israel intelligence assessed Fakhrizadeh as the chief scientist heading Iran’s nuclear weapons program which made him a target. The scientist had joined the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) in 1979 and later earned degrees in nuclear physics. He was sanctioned by the UN (2007) and the U.S. (2008) for allegedly organizing and leading Iran’s covert development of nuclear weapons. Israel viewed Iran’s nuclear scientist corps as Tehran’s center of gravity for developing a nuclear weapon. If they could kill the scientists, the collective knowledge required to build a nuclear weapon would die with them. Since there had been several assassination attempts directed against Fakhrizadeh already, he lived in a secure compound with a dedicated security detachment.

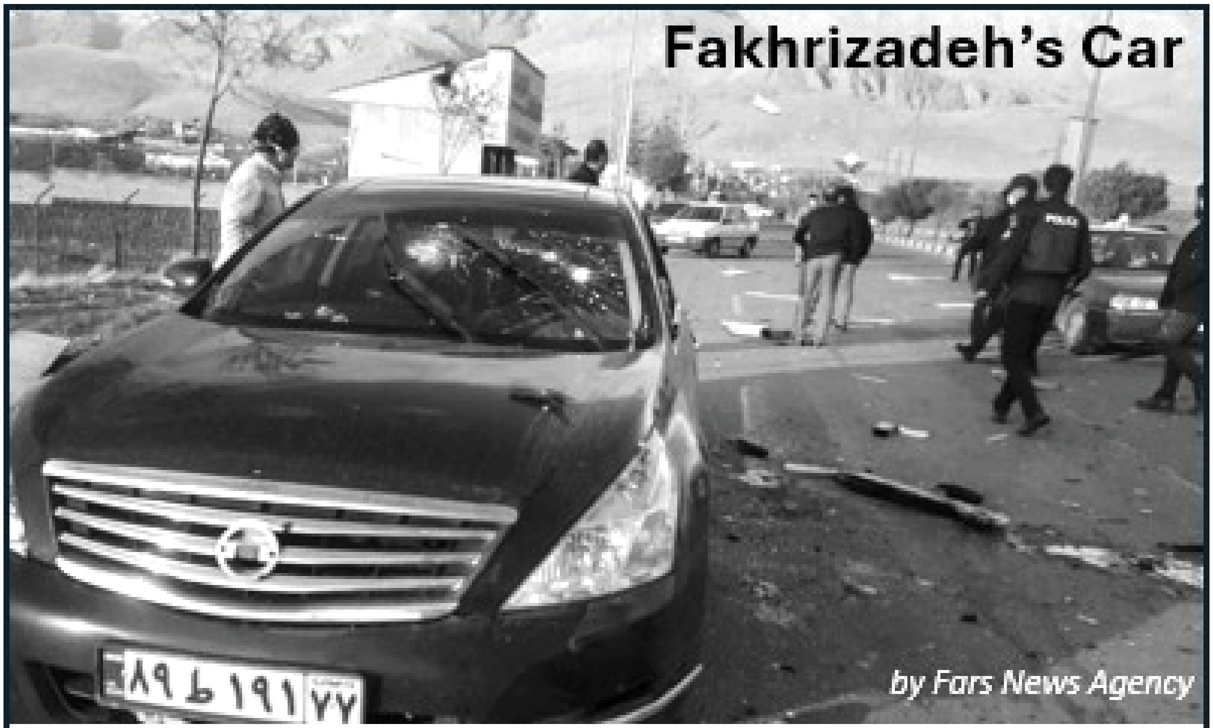
From 2007-2020, Israel’s intelligence agency Mossad killed five Iranian nuclear scientists inside Iran and wounded another. One was assassinated via poison and the others by remote control IEDs and drive-by shootings with gunmen on motorcycles. This indicated that Israel had agents operating inside the country who had freedom of movement and access to illegal material like explosives and guns. While Iranian intelligence services had information that the Fakhrizadeh was targeted for elimination, this was just one report of many as he lived under a constat threat of death.

On November 7, 2020, Fakhrizadeh departed with his family from the town of Rostamkala near the Caspian Sea to their country home in Absard. Because he didn’t like having his guards drive him in an armored vehicle, he drove his own personal unarmored car, a modest black Nissan Teana four-door sedan. Fakhrizadeh was driving with his wife in the passenger seat. Several other security vehicles accompanied them with one driving ahead to Absard to ensure the route was clear.

Despite these precautions, Israeli assets had him under surveillance and knew his likely route to Absard and had already established an ambush. A vehicle with a reconnaissance team was positioned along the route near a U-turn to positively identify him and the vehicle. A second vehicle, a blue two-door Nissan Zamyad pickup truck, was parked further along the route. In the truck bed was a remotely operated weapons system, a Belgian FN MAG 7.62 machine gun, a widely used and reliable weapon system. The truck was parked alongside the road in an assuming manner with the rear facing oncoming cars so that the weapon system, covered by a tarp, had direct line of sight down the full length of Iman Khomeini Boulevard.

As Fakhrizadeh's car approached the truck, which was about 150 meters away, the operators controlling the weapon system from inside Israel opened fire, but they were off target. They fired too low and the rounds skipped off the pavement and hit the front end of the car, damaging it. Fakhrizadeh who was understandably confused, stopped the car either to determine what just happened or to stop driving further into the kill zone. Either way, this was a fatal mistake because he was now a stationary target and the shooters in Israel had a chance to correct their aim and compensate for the 1.6 second lag time.

The operators fired another three-round burst which punched through the driver side windshield. Two of the rounds were only one inch apart while the third was six inches to the left. While the burst was meant to hit him in the chest or head, Fakhrizadeh was only wounded in the shoulder. With the car stopped and the scientist bleeding and in pain, he opened the car door and moved away from the vehicle, stepping into the middle of the road. The operators opened fire again, hitting Fakhrizadeh at least three times, with one round severing his spinal cord. The scientist fell to the ground as a bodyguard ran up and jumped on him, covering Fakhrizadeh with his own body.



Fakhrizadeh's Car

by Fars News Agency

This photo shows the Nissan with three bullet holes in the driver's side windshield. On the pavement to the right there is a pool of blood and gore.

Now that the scientist was down and covered, the operators terminated the operation and detonated the truck which was packed full of high explosives. The explosives blew the body of the truck into charred pieces that were unrecognizable, leaving only the engine block in a single contiguous piece. While Mossad wanted all parts of the remote weapon system destroyed beyond recognition, this didn't happen and the Iranians were able to recover enough of the pieces to figure out what happened. Soon, a helicopter arrived to fly Fakhrizadeh to a hospital in Tehran where he would later die.

Once the assassination was over, Iranian intelligence went to work finding out who was involved. Despite the explosion, they were able to identify the vehicle and trace it to the owner who had left the country a month prior. Iran would later accuse, prosecute and execute three Kurdish men for espionage and helping set up the ambush on behalf of a foreign power (Israel). The investigation revealed that the men smuggled in the remote weapons system and other components through Iraqi Kurdistan and into Iran disguised as shipments of alcoholic beverages.

Much of the details of the attack were disclosed in a New York Times article and another by an Iranian news outlet owned by the IRGC. Some of what was reported doesn't make sense and may be based on false assumptions or was meant to be disseminated intentionally as disinformation to disguise the true nature of the operation. To start, it was disclosed that fifteen rounds were fired and the attack took three minutes. While it is possible the shooters fired several short bursts from a machine-gun, it is also possible that they used a semi-automatic rifle for more accuracy. What makes me think it was a rifle are the two bullet holes in the window one inch apart which is very accurate for a machine-gun firing on full-auto at 150 meters distance. It's also difficult to see how the entire operation took any longer than thirty seconds. How does it make sense that firing 15 rounds from a machine-gun took three minutes?

Another issues is the reporting that the weapons system weighed 1 ton which is 2,000 pounds. Even if we add up a dozen car batteries daisy-chained together for power and several hundred pounds of explosives, how does all of this equal a ton? We know remote weapon systems were already in production by Israel that weighed a hundred pounds and there were remote rifle systems weighing under 50 pounds as early as 2012. Does it make sense that Mossad assets would smuggle in a 2,000-pound remote weapons system one piece at a time like Johnny Cash would or a 50-pound system firing a semi-automatic 7.62 mm rifle with a 30-round magazine?

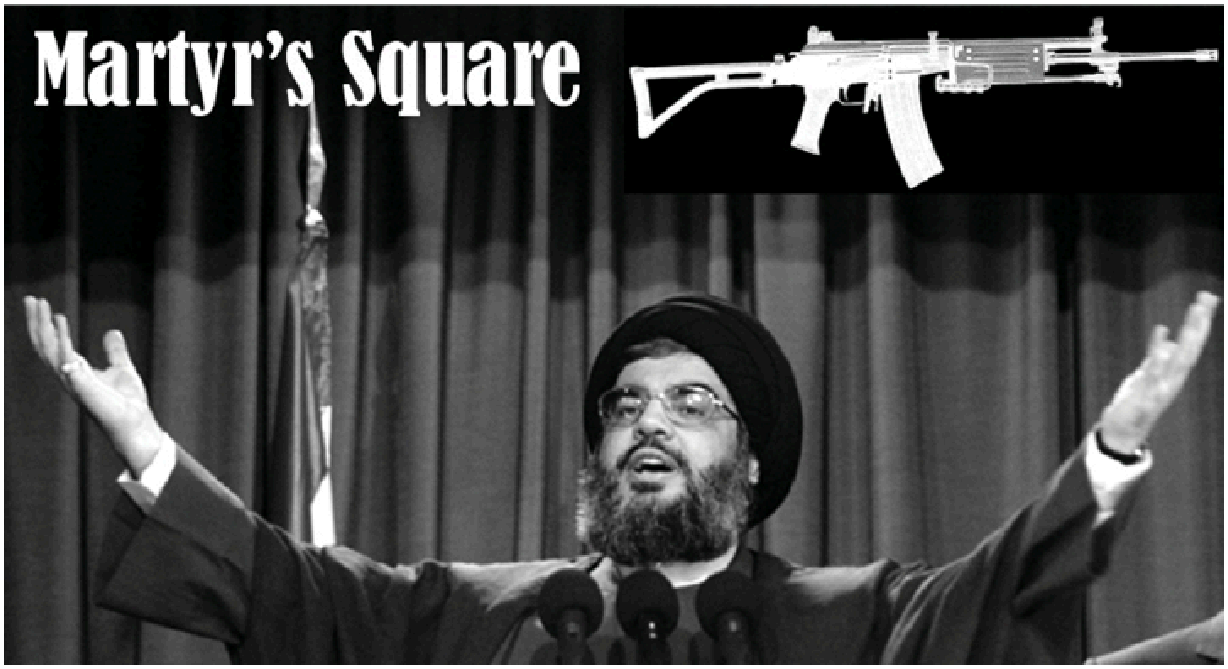
Another topic of interest is the persistent statements by the Iranians that the Israeli operatives used AI facial recognition software to identify Fakhrizadeh. While this should be discussed, it is also complete bullshit. There is no way a camera from 150 meters away penetrated the car's windshield to identify Fakhrizadeh and then software located in Israeli instantly recognized the scientist and confirmed his identity thus triggering the operation. What is more likely, is the recon team at the U-turn saw Fakhrizadeh and communicated this to the operators in Israel. Also, in Iran, the husband drives the car, not the wife. Hence, one can be sure he was driving his own car which the recon team confirmed. Part of the AI discussion was that the Mossad wanted to be sure they shot the right person and that their software determined he was the one driving, not his wife – total nonsense.

In the first edition of *Fry the Brain* published in 2009, I discussed a man in Texas who made his own homemade remote controlled rifle system using a simple tilt and pan unit, attached a camera to the scope, and controlled the whole thing through the internet on his laptop. In both editions, there is a fictional account of a remote operation targeting the leader of Hezbollah which played out exactly like this operation. It is important to look at trends and the art of the possible as it may indicate what the future holds.

FN's deFNnder Light weighs 190 lbs. with a FN240B machine-gun, a 250-round belt of 7.62 mm ammunition, and day/night thermal sensors.

Chapter 11

Martyr’s Square



Kataeb Party Offices, Beirut, Lebanon – November 23, Morning

The men sat stone-faced around the circumference of a beautiful maple table. The room was a who’s who of security officials for the Kataeb Party. Two days earlier, Pierre Amine Gemayel - the Minister of Industry and a leading member of the Party – was assassinated in broad daylight in downtown Beirut. Now, the assembled security leadership waited for Camille, the head of the Kataeb Security Council. After ten minutes, the door swung open and Camille walked in. He had on his trademark light-gray suit with a white open-collared shirt.

“Thank you for waiting, Gentlemen, I was delayed in traffic.” Two large men in cheap suits shut the door behind Camille. This was a closed-door conference and Camille’s bodyguards would remain in the hallway. Camille sat down at the only open leather chair and drank deeply from the cold glass of water set in front of him.

“Okay, Fuad, tell us what happened,” Camille started. Men in their profession got right to the point.

"As you know, Pierre and his driver were assassinated as they drove to work. They were in the Jdeideh neighborhood. According to reports, their car was run off the road by a group of men in ski-masks driving a Honda CRV. The windows of the car were tinted so no one could see in." Fuad was responsible for the security of Pierre Gemayel and his immediate family. Right now, his head was throbbing from the bottle of Kentucky Bourbon he had downed the night before.

"Has anyone found the car?" Camille asked.

"Nothing yet. We questioned some local vendors and got a general description of the assassins. They said that they looked about the same height and weight because they all wore black ski-masks and dark clothes. I'm guessing this was intentional so that they all looked the same. We're scrubbing the local car dealers and rental agencies to see who might have that type and model of Honda, but they're pretty common. If they're smart they'll burn it and dump it somewhere in the south."

"I'm not asking if their fucking smart, Fuad, I'm asking what we know." Fuad's face turned red at Camille's barb. Camille was more than a little annoyed. It was Fuad's job to keep Pierre alive and he obviously didn't do that. Plus, Camille knew that Fuad, with his jet black hair, athletic build, and striking good looks, spent as much time chasing women as he did doing his job. Even though Pierre refused to travel with a large contingent of bodyguards, Fuad knew no one else could take the blame for his death. After all, it was no mystery any number of people wanted to kill someone in the Gemayel family. Pierre's uncle, Bachir Gemayal, was murdered back in 1982, soon after he was elected president of Lebanon. Fuad cleared his throat and continued.

"There were about a hundred 9 mm shell casings at the scene of the shooting. The killers most likely used suppressed Heckler and Koch MP5s for the attack. They're plentiful with the arms dealers and hard to trace. We'll canvas the usual arms dealers and see what we find."

"Fuad, I want you to put a team of your men with the police and focus on the evidence that we do have to figure out who actually pulled the triggers. If anyone at police headquarters has a problem with that, have the chief give me a call and I'll clear it up for them." They had enough contacts and family members on the force that it shouldn't be a problem. Camille wanted to make it clear he wasn't playing games. Maybe Fuad could at least get this assignment right. "The next question: who was behind this?"

"Someone wants us to think it's Syria," William noted. William was head of intelligence for the Gemayel family. "The people who supposedly did this called in to a newspaper and said that they were the 'Fighters for the Unity and Liberty of Greater Syria.' But I think that's bullshit."

"Well, there's one group who benefits....Hezbollah." A low murmur broke out around the table. Camille just named the one group on everyone's mind. Hezbollah, the Party of God, was formed after Israel's 1982 invasion of Southern Lebanon. Hezbollah grew into a major power player since its birth only two decades prior and the party was influential down south. Hell, Hezbollah owned southern Lebanon. Everyone knew that. The Gemayel family and their men never went too far south.

"Well," William interjected, "they're a likely candidate. We all know Hezbollah's status skyrocketed with the Israeli withdrawal in 2000. They have solidified their political influence since then by joining the parliament. They control ten percent of the seats now and one-fifth of the municipalities."

"This summer certainly didn't help us any," Dori noted. Dori was special advisor to Camille and handled "special projects." "Hassan Nasrallah thinks he can get away with anything now."

"Hmmm." Camille nodded his head in agreement. Just that summer, only months before Pierre's assassination, Hezbollah fought a short but vicious war with Israel. This now-famous "July War", fought from July 12 until August 14, brought Hezbollah even more notoriety when Israel agreed to a cease-fire and withdrew its troops.

"Hezbollah would like us under their boot as much as Syria would," Dori spit out, "Are we supposed to sit here and let our families get killed, one by one, and do nothing as the Christians get squeezed out of our own country? We'll be swimming across the goddamned

Mediterranean in ten years. Maybe we can all live in Crete. Or Malta."

"No, Dori, we will not do 'nothing', but we will be smart about whatever we do." Camille assured him. "Gentlemen if you would excuse us, I need to speak with William and Dori." The others stood up and filed out into the hallway. "Okay, what we're about to talk about stays in this room with us three."

"Yes," William agreed.

"Of course," Dori echoed.

"The family has decided to act. The decision has been made to get rid of Nasrallah."

"You can't be serious!" William exclaimed in disbelief, "Do you want another civil war? One we can't win?"

"No, we don't, but we won't have the leading members of the Kataeb Party killed in broad daylight. The other parties, the Sunnis and Shiites, can smell weakness. They can smell it like a sickness. Weakness is death. Either we show them we're not weak or we get pushed to the side politically, socially, religiously, and militarily."

"Well, what do you want from me?" William might disagree, but it wasn't his decision to make. He got paid to take orders.

"I want you to start collecting information on Nasrallah. Dori, you'll execute the action. Make it deniable. Make it untraceable to the Gemayels and the Kataeb Party. If you need outside help, get it. Money is no object. Spare no expense. You have the backing of the family, at the highest levels, to get anything you need."

"Yes, alright. What's the time window for action?"

"As soon as feasible. As long as it's untraceable. If it takes months, it takes months. Are we clear with everything here?" William and Dori looked at each other and then at Camille and nodded in unison.

Hezbollah Headquarters, Beirut, Lebanon – January 7, Afternoon

Hassan Nasrallah sat with his legs crossed on an ornate silk carpet, sipping hot tea. Around him were the other members of the Shura Council. They were discussing the current situation: the Christians and Sunnis didn't want to give up their traditional status in Lebanese politics, while Hezbollah was determined to rewrite

Lebanon’s political map. Hezbollah intended to continue their pressure on the government until the Party of God had a political stranglehold on Southern Lebanon and the eastern Bekaa Valley. Hezbollah didn’t want a civil war, but the threat of civil war could be very useful.

“We must keep up the pressure on the government using all available means. Every avenue should be pursued and looked into,” Nasrallah said after finishing off his tea.

“It would be wise to use our latest victory as a show of strength. A public demonstration would do much for the organization.”

“Yes, a display of Hezbollah’s popularity and numbers would indicate to the government our political strength.” Sheik Amin agreed whole-heartedly. Sheik Amin was long a vocal supporter of popular means to extract concessions from their political opponents.

“What better date to show our political unity than a celebration on the first anniversary of our great victory.” Nasrallah, as Secretary General of Hezbollah, always had a sense for combining public spectacle with political expediency.

“A large gathering of our supporters would show not only Lebanon, but the entire region, our vitality as a movement,” Sheik al-Mussawi stated matter of factly. Al-Mussawi, with his gray beard and receding hairline, was the eldest member of the council. “It is important to show the world that we have recovered from the July War and that we are spiritually unbroken.” Nasrallah stared thoughtfully at the wall, squinting through his prescription glasses.

“What do you think, Imad?”

“Anytime we organize a large public rally, our enemies will have a chance to exploit the confusion. Absolute security cannot be guaranteed in such a situation.” Imad had been a member of Hezbollah from the very beginning and had worked his way up the ranks until he was now head of security for the organization. Imad had masterminded such prominent operations like the car bombing of the Americans’ Beirut barracks in 1983, the attack on the U.S. Embassy in 1984, the kidnapping of four Soviet officials in 1985, and scores of other operations of every description from plane jackings and hostage-taking to assassinations and high-risk raids. Imad was wanted by every Western government on the planet and therefore had impeccable credentials with the Shura Council.

"It is worth the risks. Hezbollah will not hide from its enemies like a milk snake hiding from the gardener. I will speak to the gathered followers of Hezbollah on August 14 and show them our will power just as they show us their commitment. We will hold our rally at the Martyr's Square in the very heart of the capital. Lebanon and Israel will see our strength and see our fearlessness."

Imad nodded his head in agreement. He had a large task ahead of him, but he would have the help of the security battalion he personally trained. Allah would look over Hezbollah and so would Imad's gun-toting security guards.

A Cafe, Marseille, France – March 24, Lunch Time

Jacques and Dori sat at a busy sidewalk cafe with a wide view of the water. The temperature was a comfortable sixty degrees as a mild breeze blew in from the perennially warm waters of the Mediterranean. They just finished a satisfying meal of scrambled eggs, warm croissants, and reasonably priced wine. Dori leaned closer to Jacques.

"Well, I must say you come highly recommended in the circles that we travel." Jacques smiled pleasantly as he eyed the surrounding terrain. Jacques wasn't going to show his cards until he knew what the Lebanese was going to put on the table. He was sure the Lebanese was legitimate because not just anyone knew what Jacques did for a living or knew how to find him. Nonetheless, Jacques searched the Lebanese in the men's room to ensure he wasn't wearing a wire. Jacques then whispered quietly in his ear, "we will refer to Lebanon as 'the park', to the intended target as 'the traffic' and to one hundred thousand Euros as 'apples'."

The Lebanese seemed reassured Jacques was so security conscious. Once they got to the table, Jacques made the Lebanese take the battery out of his cell phone, asked him to put his watch in his pocket, and then placed a small pocket radio on the table and turned it on for background noise.

"Well, going to the park won't be easy or cheap," Jacques began. If the Lebanese couldn't afford his services, it was best to figure this out first.

"Yes, I know. That won't be a problem."

"How bad is the traffic at the park?"

"It's a real problem."

"Well, I can think of several traffic problems that are bigger than others." Jacques knew about Lebanese politics and knew Dori was representing the Christian Kataeb. The target could be from several problem groups: Syria, Hezbollah, the Amal Shiite Group, or even a rival Christian party.

"The traffic is worse at the southern entrance to the park," Dori advised.

"Hmmmm. A very big problem indeed." The Lebanese was definitely talking about Hezbollah. But who in Hezbollah? "Who's causing this traffic problem? I can think of one in particular who can redirect all this traffic at will."

"Yes, that's the problem." Dori knew exactly who the Frenchman was referring to. Jacques thought the Lebanese must be out of his mind.

"There will have to be quite a few apples at the park to make all the traffic worthwhile," Jacques grinned. The Lebanese had to know hiring someone to kill the head of Hezbollah wouldn't come cheap. Suicide missions never came for free.

"Would three apples be worth it?" Dori threw out a ballpark figure.

"Three apples up front to get the ball rolling. And three apples after the park."

"That's a lot of apples my friend."

"Yes, but if you think the traffic is worth anything less, good luck to you."

"Hmmmm." Dori thought aloud for a second. 600,000 euros was nothing to laugh at. Dori could hire an entire battalion of militia for that much money...for ten years.

"If you want to get some wet-behind-the-ears amateur, go ahead. There are plenty of assclowns in your neighborhood to screw it up for you." If the Lebanese thought he could kill Nasrallah by pinching pennies, he was mistaken. But Jacques knew the Lebanese wouldn't be here if they could do the job themselves. The Christian militias were as ineffective as the rest of the ragtag Sunni and Shiite mobs plaguing Lebanon. Jacques worked in Beirut before when he was in *la Legion Etrangere* and he knew firsthand the unsophisticated antics of the various militias.

“No, no. You are right. Six apples is good.”

“Okay, we’ll meet in three days, at the same time, at the main entrance of Fort Saint Nicholas at the Old Port. Do you know where that is?”

“I heard of it. I can find it.” Dori went to school in Paris for four years and spoke French fluently. He could find anything in the country.

“We’ll arrange the specifics of my consulting fee then. Be prepared to transfer the apples at that time.”

“Until then.” Jacques left a twenty Euro note on the table, grabbed his pocket radio, and walked away from the docks, towards the heart of the old city.

Kataeb Party Offices, Beirut, Lebanon – April 4, Afternoon

Camille was still on the phone, wearing his ubiquitous gray suit, when William knocked on the door, then entered. Camille motioned him to sit down. William rarely wore a full suit like Camille because he thought it attracted too much attention. William preferred to wear an inexpensive sports coat, a fifty dollar watch, a polo shirt, and either slacks or jeans, depending on the company. In the world of intelligence, it paid to blend with one’s surroundings. At five feet eight inches tall and a healthy 180 pounds, William certainly didn’t attract any undue attention. He could either be a Taxi driver or a store owner. Only the Walther P99 pistol, secured in a leather holster in the small of his back, gave any indication to his real trade.

“Well, William, what do we have?’ Camille asked as he hung up the phone.

“Hezbollah is planning a rally this summer in Beirut to show their strength. We don’t know the exact date yet or the exact location. But as the rally gets closer, we’ll get it. They can’t keep the lid on something that big for long.”

“Agreed. Imad is nothing if not careful.” Camille and William both knew who Imad was because they tried to kill him before. Not many people were in the game as long as Imad. This longevity was no small feat seeing as how Israel would love to find out where Imad was at any given time. Jerusalem had a GPS-guided bomb with Imad’s name on it if they could just find the right address to send it to.

“Dori contacted the Frenchman. He’s a contract killer, a professional shooter. He did that job in Algeria and...”

“Oh really?” Camille interrupted, “that was a high-risk job if there ever was one.” They were referring to the recent guerrilla war in Algeria. Fighting flared up in 1991 after the Algerian government cancelled elections when it looked like the Islamic Salvation Front would win handily. A bitter war ensued for the next fifteen years. Jacques was hired to deal with a splinter group called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which publicly endorsed Al-Qaeda in 2003. Jacques dealt a severe blow to the group when he took out their charismatic leader, getting him with a shot to the head from six hundred meters while the target stood in front of his family at a friend’s funeral.

“Yes. He’s also done some ‘work’ for the Afghan government since 9/11. He’s costing us a pretty penny.”

“I know.” Camille looked at it as a long-term investment. All investments carried some sort of risk.

“Dori says he’s a real tight-ass about security.”

“Well, that’s nice for a change,” Camille said dryly. “Make sure security is our priority throughout the operation.”

“Of course.”

Hezbollah’s Security Office, Beirut, Lebanon – May 27, Morning

Imad had the entire leadership from his security battalion present. The rally was still months away, but it would take that long to prepare for it. The security battalion protected the members of the Shura Council, the Secretary General himself, and defended Hezbollah’s headquarters in times of war.

Imad started the discussion.

“This is a most serious event, not only for the image of Hezbollah, but because Sayyid Nasrallah will be speaking to the people.” Everyone nodded their heads.

“Mohammad, your section will be responsible for the outer ring of security. You’ll establish checkpoints at all the major intersections. Block off whatever roads you can’t man effectively. You are the shield against car bombs. Better for them to be stopped at the checkpoints than let them get to the heart of the people.”

“I’ll come up with a security plan this week and show you the layout. I’ll need some equipment like the under-the-car mirrors and barriers.” Muhammad had fifty men in his section. He would have to look carefully at the city’s roads to control the most crucial intersections.

“Ragheb, your platoons will man the rooftop positions, near Muhammad’s checkpoints, depending on the buildings.” Ragheb had five fifteen-man platoons, each with an SA-14 anti-aircraft team, an RPG team, and a machine-gun team.

“Yes. Once I see Muhammad’s plan, I’ll make my own, so they overlap with each other.” SA-14’s were always needed because the Israelis preferred to take out lucrative Hezbollah targets with their helicopters armed with anti-tank missiles. The RPG teams could take out armored vehicles down on the streets or a helicopter flying overhead. The machine-gun teams could deal with any civilian vehicles and also target enemy helicopters. Ragheb’s positions would be out far enough to provide early warning for the checkpoints.

“Very good, Ragheb. Hassan, you have the close-in security positions, down at the podium and the special seating. Have you gotten the new equipment yet?” Hassan had a forty-man section providing physical security for the speakers and special guests. They acted as a physical barrier to any over-enthusiastic supporters or visible threats from the crowd. Most of them were chosen for their size. Physical intimidation was a valuable trait in a large crowd.

“Yes, sir. I received most of the new equipment last week and will get the rest before August. We‘ll be ready.” Hassan and his men just received fifty new sets of Level IIIA soft body armor vests. Each man was also issued a Glock 17 pistol. Now they were just waiting on the arrival of the ear-piece communication sets. Imad insisted they use the most up-to-date tools.

“Assad, you know your task.”

“We just need to make sure we can talk to you during the rally.” Assad led a group of twenty men who would dress and act like the rest of the crowd of Hezbollah supporters. As they intermingled with the crowd in two-man teams, they would look for any enemy agents and either deal with them on the spot or call Imad so he could take action and get the Shura out of the danger zone.

“Assad, make sure your cell phones are in working order. We may have to react fast in an emergency.” Cell-phones were the quickest, most reliable way to communicate and they were so common they didn’t raise any suspicion.

“And Ibrahim, you have the counter-sniper duty with your men.” Since Imad had started his career helping the PLO as a sniper, he took a special interest in making sure Ibrahim’s section was well-trained and ready for their duties. Imad personally trained Ibrahim and Imad knew he could handle any task.

“We have completed the testing on the new system and will be ready to use it at the celebration.” Ibrahim was referring to the acoustic counter-sniper system they just purchased through a contact in Saudi Arabia. Ibrahim would have one group monitoring the acoustic sensors and computer, but he would also have three teams of snipers located on the roofs nearest the speaker’s podium. These men, armed with Dragunov sniper rifles, binoculars, and radios would keep a sharp eye out for other snipers and threats in the crowd. Imad would personally command a twenty-man section that would be stationed in a near-by building, out of view of the people. This section was a heavily armed reaction force, ready to take on any unforeseen threats.

“Take this assignment seriously, as Allah is watching you and so is Sayyid Nasrallah. Allah Akbar!”

“Allah Akbar!” they returned in unison. God is great. There was nothing else to say.

Central Airport, Iraklion, Crete – June 8, Early Afternoon

The plane trip from Marseille to the capital of Crete, the largest of the Greek islands, was uneventful. It was easy to get aboard Dori’s private plane in France, unnoticed by the airport officials. All Jacques had to do was lie down in the back of Dori’s blacked-out limousine and then get on the plane while it was still parked in the hangar. Since no one saw Jacques get on the plane, when they were asked to supply a manifest of those on board, Dori listed himself, the crew chief, and the pilot. Just in case the plane was boarded by French officials, Dori had a smuggler's compartment built into the private bathroom where Jacques could hide if needed.

After four hours of smooth flying, Dori and Jacques were on the ancient island of Crete. When they arrived at Dori's hangar, they got off the plane and into a waiting vehicle. They didn't have to worry about nosy customs officials because the officials at the airport were paid to look the other way. As long as there were no embarrassing incidents associated with Dori while he stayed on the island, he could discretely move one or two people in and out of the airport with no questions asked.

Crete was a major European tourist attraction, with millions of people a year traveling to the beautiful, mountainous island. There was a constant flow of planes flying in and out of the island and privately chartered aircraft, like Dori's, were common. The island also boasted a booming recreational and pleasure boating community. In addition to the legal means of getting in and out of Crete, there were the extralegal ones. Due to Crete's ideal location in the Mediterranean, the island was a minor hub for trafficking illegal drugs and people. All in all, Crete provided the perfect locale fora person to discretely arrive and then depart without anyone from officialdom taking notice.

The next leg of the journey would take a little longer. Dori and Jacques would depart Crete on a private yacht, cross the remainder of the eastern Mediterranean over the course of several days, and arrive at a private dock on the coast of Lebanon. Jacques could have flown commercially to Lebanon with much less hassle. However, an incriminating trail of credit card transactions and receipts could be connected to him. Also, Jacques didn't want to burn one of his assumed identities when he didn't have to. It was a hassle acquiring professional-grade forgeries. This way, Jacques could deny he was ever in the country.

At worst, while in Lebanon, Jacques could be charged with illegal immigration. After all, he didn't carry anything incriminating on his person: no weapons, no plans, nothing. He did have a fake French identification card with him and Dori had prepared for him forged Lebanese papers as well. While in Lebanon, Jacques would be referred to as his Lebanese nom de guerre of ‘Abbas’. All the tools Jacques needed for the operation would be acquired in-country. Dori had most of the tools ready from the list Jacques gave him back in March. Soon, they would be in Lebanon and the next phase would begin.

A Safehouse, Jbail, Lebanon – June 10, Late Morning

Jacques and Dori arrived at Jbail as planned. Dori’s men were waiting to help dock the yacht. A car was waiting to take them to the safehouse. While they had a secure house to work in, they also had access to a secluded farm just north of the town they could use as needed. Security wasn’t an issue this far north because it was a Christian dominated area. After settling in, Jacques took inventory of the equipment he ordered. First, he looked at the rifle, an Israeli-made Galil AR 7.62 mm assault rifle.

“Dori, where’d the rifle come from?”

“We got it off the body of a Shiite in southern Beirut a year ago.”

“Okay, we need to make sure it’s ‘clean’ and can’t be connected to your group in any way.”

“Yeah, it’s clean. Hezbollah probably got it off an Israeli soldier and we took it from them. There’s nothing tracing it to us. Weapons get stolen or captured in this country all the time. We couldn’t trace them if we wanted to. We got the scope from our own stocks. Untraceable of course.”

“Good. We’ll have to test fire it at the farm and make sure it’s reliable. It looks relatively unused and in good condition.”

“Just like you asked for, Abbas,” Dori grinned, finding it slightly amusing Jacques was using an Arab name.

“And this suppressor?” Jacques was looking at a BR-Tuote reflex suppressor. He preferred this model of suppressor because it snapped on the Galil with ease and only lengthened the weapon by a couple of inches. It was a quiet, reliable suppressor.

“Brand new. Out of the box. Got if from one of our regular contacts in Europe. No connections to us.”

“How about this tilt-pan unit?”

“That was easy. We got it off the black market, paid in cash, with no questions asked. My guy who bought it said he needed it for his camera so he could make home movies with his girlfriend.” Dori smiled again. He thought that was pretty funny.

“And the web-cam?” Jacques inspected the camera as he talked.

“Yep, that’s an easy one too. From a local vendor in a cash transaction. Latest model. Good optics. Came with the software and everything. Everyone is buying those things around here. We got it near the university. ”

“The laptops?” Jacques looked at two Compaq Toughbook laptop computers.

“Bought those two used, but in good shape, from a consignment shop in the capital. About a year old. Cash. No questions asked.”

“How’s internet service in the capital?”

“It depends on where you’re at. All the major hotels have the latest and most of the lines have been repaired since the Israelis bombed them in the summer. You can just plug your laptop in once you’re in your room and you’re connected. In other areas, people go with satellite service. You may have some lag time, but it’s pretty reliable. Or we can use any one of the coffee shops that specialize in by-the-minute internet service. If we go by satellite, we pay for the service on-line, with a credit card. Totally anonymous.”

“I’m guessing these car batteries, power inverter, and automatic car door lock actuator were easy.”

“Yup. Our family owns an automobile import-export businesses. We can get any part from any car you need. What’s all this stuff for? I mean, I understand the rifle, scope, and silencer, but I don’t get the rest.”

“Well, Dori, I’m assuming that Hezbollah’s security is going to be really tight and that they’ll be prepared for a traditional sniper.”

“Yes, of course.”

“You and I aren’t going to be a traditional sniper. We’re going to build a remotely controlled sniper rifle that we can control via the internet either from a hundred meters away or a mile away or an entire country away.” Dori looked dumbfounded as he tried to put all the pieces together in his mind.

“Let me help you out, Dori. We’re going to mount the rifle, after we modify it, onto a frame and then onto the tilt-pan unit. We’re going to sight the web-cam through the scope. We’re going to attach the automatic car door actuator to the trigger. We’re going to wire the tilt-pan unit, web-cam, and actuator to the laptop. We’re going to power all this with the car batteries, if we have to. Then, we’re going to network the second laptop to the first one so we can control the rifle remotely. When we have it all connected, we’ll be able to sit at the laptop and see what the rifle sees through its scope. We’ll be able to tilt and pan the rifle in any direction we want with the arrow keys. And we’ll be able to pull the trigger by hitting a specific key on the keyboard.”

“Ohhhhh! I see!” It all made sense now to Dori, “Just like a video game.”

“Yeah, pretty close to it. Now, we can control the rifle using the remote-control that came with the tilt-pan unit. However, we would have to be about a hundred meters from the unit. It would also be susceptible to jamming and normal city interferences. So, it would be best to have one of your people, with programming skills, come up with a software patch so we can all do it through the computers.”

“No problem. I have someone ready from our family waiting to help us. She’s completely trustworthy and has her degree in computer science from the American University of Beirut. Pierre Gemayel was her cousin.”

“Okay, we’ll get started tomorrow. We’ll zero the rifle at the farm and then modify it by removing its stock, taking off the pistol grip, and shortening the magazine. Then we can construct the frame. It’ll take us a week just to get the system set up. Then, we’re going to have to start working in the capital and study the terrain and pick the right spot.” Jacques couldn’t finalize the plan until he actually walked the streets

where the operation would take place.

“Well, let’s get a good night night’s sleep and get to work in the morning.”

“Yeah, see you then, Abbas.” Jacques was glad Dori didn’t offer up the usual night of women and booze. If you’re here to kill someone, then spend every iota of mental and physical energy killing that person.

Safehouse, Beirut, Lebanon - July 17, In the Evening

Jacques and Dori arrived at their safehouse, an apartment located in the south central part of the city where the old Green Line was. It was called the “Green Line” because of all the trees and bushes that thrived in the no man’s land between the warring factions. The safehouse was on the very fringe of the Christian controlled area that was patrolled by the Kataeb militia. The apartment was only a ten minute drive and a twenty-five minute walk from the heart of the Shiite area. “Well, Dori, this looks like a good place for us.”

“The man who owns this building is a Christian and I have two of my undercover men living next door to us for security.” Jacques was the shooter, but Dori’s family ran this part of town.

“We need to get a feel for the city and see what kind of security Hezbollah has set up here.” Jacques walked through the apartment as he talked, inspecting the kitchen and the refrigerator. Bring! Bring! Dori’s cell phone rang from inside his jacket.

“Yes. Okay – got it.” Dori hung up the phone. “That was William. We got a location for August – Martyr’s Square. No exact date yet. One of our other safehouses has a view of the square. We knew such a location would come in handy eventually. It’s a popular area for the Shiites to gather.”

“Perfect. We’ll set up the system in that location. Is it an apartment?”

“Yes. We put one of Pierre’s second cousins by marriage there six months ago. He uses a Shiite name, prays at a Shiite mosque, and goes to the university to study for religion. The day we do our operation, he’ll go back north and disappear like he was never there.” Dori had already called the cousin so that he knew to expect visitors. Jacques wondered to himself how many family members Dori had. They were like the Corsican mob. They had their hands in everything.

“Okay, we’ll have to check it out and then start moving the equipment up their piece by piece so no one notices. We can bring it up in food bags, appliance boxes, coolers, or anything else that fits in. We're going to have to hide it in there too."

"Yeah, we're prepared for that. The couch in there is hollowed out, so we can lift up the cushions and store it in there, completely hidden from view."

"First thing we have to do is check out the window we'll be shooting from. What kind of windows are in the apartment?" Jacques wanted to know what kind of tools they would need to modify the window.

"Just the normal windows with panes." Dori's eyes were shut tight as he searched his memory, trying to conjure up an image of the windows in the building.

"So, just like the ones in this apartment?" Jacques knew from experience that no matter where you were in the world, a specific area usually exhibited the same kind of architecture. If a building in one neighborhood had a certain design, a building in another part of the city probably had the same architectural features: the same doors, the same windows, the same roof, etc.

"Yes. Now that I think of it, exactly the same. Are we going to shoot with the window open just a crack?"

"No, standard counter-sniper procedure throughout the world, either here, in Europe, or wherever, is to ensure all windows in the area are closed shut. Because, if a sniper shoots through a glass plane, the first round will deflect and probably miss the target. Also, the shattered glass will not only be heard but can be seen from a distance."

"So, if you're saying the window will be shut, but we're not shooting through it, what are we going to do?" Dori didn't understand.

"Here's what we do. We replace the bottom panes of glass with thin, clear plastic. So, from a distance, it looks like normal clear glass. However, when we shoot through it, the rounds punch straight through with no deflection. And the plastic doesn't shatter – there are just small holes in it from where the bullets go through."

"Ohhhhhh. I see...very clever...I never would have thought of that." Dori was impressed.

"We could do other techniques if we had to, like cut a small hole in the glass and cover it with plastic or even make a gunport by knocking out a small hole in the wall so we don't even have to go through the window. But, since the windows have panes like the ones here in our apartment, that's the best way to go. We can change out the panes of glass with plastic ones quickly and quietly at night. But first, let's go drive by Martyr's Square and the apartment so we can come up with a plan."

"Okay, I'll let my men know that we're leaving."

The Apartment Overlooking Martyr's Square - August 10

Jacques peered through the side window of the corner apartment. If he looked at an angle, he could see a large part of Martyr's Square. The apartment's location was perfect – it was on the third, top level of the building and its location on the corner gave an excellent view of the surrounding neighborhood.

"This looks good," Jacques commented as he tapped his knuckles on the plastic windowpanes.

"And we know for sure that the big gathering is on the 14th." Dori had just gotten that from William a day earlier.

"I bet they use that administration building to conduct their preparations for the rally." Jacques was thinking aloud as he surveyed the buildings. "They'll need power for their speakers and microphones, toilets and water, and a place for the party leadership to loiter before the actual speech."

"That one to the south is a Hezbollah party building." Dori agreed with Jacques' educated guess.

"I bet they'll set up the speaker's stand in front of that building. This window gives us a good angle. Even if they set up somewhere nearby, we have them covered. It'll be a three-hundred meter shot at least. Maybe three-twenty-five. We'll check the map again to be sure." They had a good aerial map of the city, so estimating distance was no longer an art, but a matter of accurately measuring the distance with a ruler.

"Yeah," Dori nodded in agreement as he looked out the window and guessed the distance on his own.

"Let's get this room set up so we can do a test run when it gets darker." Jacques wanted to make sure all the components of the system were in working order, even though they had tested it in Jbail several times.

“What do we need to do?”

“We’re going to move that wardrobe in front of the door so if someone looks in they don’t see our system. Also, we’re going to attach the drapes on the window to the tip of the suppressor.”

“Why’s that?” Dori wondered.

“Well, we’ll put a piece of wire around the suppressor and secure the drapes there. The drapes will conceal the system from anyone looking in the window from the outside, like counter-sniper teams with binoculars. As we pan the system right or left, the drapes will move with the weapon, keeping it concealed. But, if we pan the system more than a foot to the right or left, the drapes will pull free.”

“Why would we pan the system any more than that...we would be shooting the wall.”

“You’ll see. We’re going to have a few surprises set up like a counter-assault package and a counter-forensics package. That’s why we brought the explosives. But we won’t set up the packages until the night before in case they sweep the rooms before the rally. Tonight, we’ll make the stuff we need to conceal our packages.”

“Oh, that’s why we bought the flag and the five-gallon cooler.” Dori was starting to put it all together.

“Let’s get to work.”

Martyr’s Square - August 14, 10:05 a.m.

Jacques and Dori sat in front of the Toughbook. Even though their hotel room was air-conditioned, both were sweating as they peered intently at the screen. They could clearly see the reticles of the scope and the front of the administration building. Outside their fifth-story hotel window, six hundred meters away, they could just see the east end of the square and the crowds of people mobbing it. The apartment where their system was set up was hidden from their view.

The square itself was packed with thousands of Hezbollah supporters dressed in black with bright green headbands. Hundreds of yellow Hezbollah flags hung from the surrounding buildings. Scores of tents were in place, serving refreshments and protecting the crowd from the blistering sun. The air in the square was hot and stale. There was no wind blowing at all. The crowd had begun to gather hours earlier, even though the Secretary General of the party wasn’t scheduled to speak until ten.

Imad surveyed the sea of people. He called his lieutenants on his hand-held Motorola radio, verifying that they were in position. All was clear. Imad called inside the administration building and signaled that it was okay for the Secretary General to come outside.

Nasrallah walked through the front door in his flowing robes. As soon as the crowd saw him they began a thunderous chant: ‘Hezbollah! Hezbollah! Hezbollah!’ The sound was absolutely deafening as ten thousand voices reverberated off the surrounding buildings. Hassan’s burly, armored bodyguards leaned into the crowd, keeping them back from the Secretary General and the members of the Shura Council seated behind him on a modest wooden platform.

Nasrallah strode confidently to the podium and held both arms up in the air, silencing the crowd with a stern look. Nasrallah slowly looked around the square and then called out in a deep voice, “Allaaaaaaaah Akbar!” He dragged out the last part of ‘Allah’ for dramatic effect. The crowd - hot, sweating, agitated - roared back as one, “Allaaaaaaaaaah Akbar!” Then, they chanted with renewed vigor, “Hezbollah! Hezbollah! Hezbollah!”

The first 7.62 mm, fully-jacketed, armor-piercing round entered Nasrallah’s mouth and blew out the back of his head in a bright red spray that included tiny pieces of his skull and globs of gray brain matter. It was as if he had a watermelon sitting on his shoulders instead of a skull with muscles and sinew and hair. The Secretary General slumped to the pavement like a puppet with his strings cut. The next round struck one of Hassan’s bodyguards directly in the chest, piercing his soft body armor, punching through his left lung. Blood oozed out of his chest and mouth. His eyes stared wide open, uncomprehending. The entire square broke into pandemonium. As if on command, the crowd instantly split into a hundred separate mobs as they rushed the checkpoints in search of cover.

Imad instinctively crouched below a barrier near the podium and called Ibrahim on the radio, “What do you have?”

“Nothing...absolutely nothing! We’re looking!” Ibrahim listened to Imad in one ear as he listened to his other radio, which his sniper team leaders were calling.

"What about the counter-sniper system?!?"

"I'm checking it...nothing!" By now, Hassan's men were physically grabbing the members of the Shura Council and manhandling them into the cover of the administration building.

Jacques and Dori watched the chaos through their web-cam. The crowd looked like some giant organism trying to fight its way out of an enclosed space, looking for any opening it could find to squirt out of.

"Fucking internet lag! It's throwing my shots off!" Jacques wasn't too upset seeing as how his first shot was dead on.

"They're going in the building, through the door, right there!" Dori excitedly jabbed a finger at the screen.

"I'm tracking." Jacques pushed the button and sent another bullet down range, hitting a bodyguard in his lower spine, just below his armor. Jacques was trying to get the council members before they got inside, but the bodyguards were shielding them with their bodies.

"I'm going to target the checkpoints and then the crowd." There were only twenty rounds in the magazine, so Jacques had to choose his targets carefully to inflict as much terror as possible with judicially selected targets.

"We got something! The computer says the shooting is coming from one of those corner apartments on the right side, but I can't tell from what floor!" Ibrahim screamed into his walkie-talkie. He knew someone was using a suppressed rifle, because he couldn't hear any gunshots, even as the bodies were dropping. He was still in mental shock. He couldn't believe what he had seen before his eyes. The great leader's head had exploded right in front of Allah and everyone else.

"I heard you! Have your sniper teams cover that part of the building. I'm sending the assault teams in. We'll search each floor until we get the right one." Imad would have his men in the building in a minute...maybe two at the most, depending on how hard it was to fight through the panic-stricken crowd.

"We only have one round left." Jacques panned the gun away from the window, breaking free of the drapes, and towards the doorway inside the room. “When we see the first one come through the door, we’ll start the sequence.”

Imad’s assault team reached the bottom apartment in a frenzy. They kicked in the door, their AK-47’s at the ready. An old lady stood across the room, by the window, scared to death. The assault team swarmed through her two-room apartment.

“We got nothing on the first floor!” Imad announced on the radio to anyone who was listening. Thirty seconds later they had torn the second apartment apart and were onto the third floor. The first assault team member kicked the door in with his boot and eyed the room wildly, his assault rifle at the ready. Four more gunmen came in behind him, sweat pouring off their brows.

All they saw was well-used furniture and a Hezbollah party flag hanging in the corner of the room. One man kicked in the door to the adjacent bedroom but fell after running into a wardrobe positioned two feet from the door. The second man stepped over the first and rounded the corner. Just as he cleared the wardrobe, he took a bullet square in the chest, knocking him flat on his back. Two other assaulters blindly fired their assault rifles on full auto, shredding the wardrobe and hammering the room with 7.62 mm bullets.

Jacques and Dori only saw a blur as the first man came around the wardrobe. The assaulter had filled the entire web-cam and scope because he was so close.

“That’s it, they found the gun. Here goes the mine.” Jacques pushed a button on the Toughbook. This sent a signal to the laptop in the apartment, completing a circuit. The circuit ran from the laptop, through a wire that went under the rug, up along the wall, through a small hole drilled in the adjacent wall, and into a blasting cap secured firmly in a Soviet MON-100 anti-personnel mine. The mine was hanging from a nail in the top left corner of the adjacent room. However, no one in the room could see it because of the Hezbollah flag hanging in front of it. The electric blasting cap detonated the mine’s four and a half pounds of explosives in a deafening explosion that hurled four hundred pieces of shrapnel throughout the close confines of the living room, shredding five members of the Hezbollah assault team.

“Now, for the counter-forensics charge.” Jacques pressed another key on the Toughbook. A five pound charge of Semtex plastic explosives obliterated the pan-tilt unit, the other laptop, and blew the Galil and its aluminum frame mount to pieces. Simultaneously, a tandem charge ignited and blew a cheap plastic, ten-gallon cooler filled with a mixture of high-octane gasoline and liquid soap - homemade napalm. The entire room burst into a ball of flame, burning alive two men from the assault team and charring to a blackened crisp the one who had been shot in the chest.

“Okay, we’re done here. We’ll sit tight for a couple of hours while we erase the hard drive on the laptop. Once we get back to the safehouse, we’ll remove the hard drive and destroy it. We might stay here for the night if the streets are still crazy.”

“Yeah, we’ll stay here until it clears up.” Dori, too, didn’t want to risk getting stopped and questioned by a Hezbollah patrol.

“They’re going to find parts of the Galil, the pan-tilt unit, and the computer, but there won’t be much left. Any witnesses from the assault team who saw the complete system are dead. Depending on how long the apartment burns for, they probably won’t figure out how the attack took place. Once they count all the bodies, they’ll think the shooter got away.” Jacques was sure there wouldn’t be any incriminating evidence left behind.

Hezbollah Headquarters – August 14, 5:30 p.m.

Imad sat in the headquarters aid station, holding his right arm that was bandaged and in a sling. He was in the hallway when the anti-personnel mine blew. The shrapnel from the blast had gone through the wall of the apartment and into the man standing in front of him. Only Allah had spared him from death. Even though he had a dozen pieces of shrapnel in his arm, he was alive. The door to the medical room swung open. Ibrahim walked in.

“Are you okay?” Imad grunted.

“We searched the apartment after the explosion but didn’t find much. Part of the third floor collapsed. It’ll take a week to sift through the wreckage.” Ibrahim looked at Imad’s arm. Red stains of blood seeped through the stark white bandages.

“Well, thanks be to Allah, we went through with all of our security precautions,” Imad croaked with some satisfaction. Ibrahim took this as a sarcastic rebuke of not just him, but of all the security sections. Ibrahim tried to understand what happened.

“We couldn’t see anything, Imad. Even when the shooting started, we didn’t hear or see anything. How was this possible? The acoustic system said it might have been that apartment, but it could have been from the other ones further down the same street. Now the General Secretary is dead and we helped cause it.”

“Not to worry, Ibrahim, Allah watches over Hezbollah and you and me. You did your job very well and I am proud of you and our fallen comrades.”

“What are you talking about, Imad? Are you hallucinating from loss of blood? The Secretary General is dead, fifteen of our men have gone to paradise, and scores of our people were trampled to death in the streets. Are you mad?” Ibrahim couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Imad looked up at Ibrahim, “Are you so sure our great leader is dead, old friend?”

Kataeb Party Offices, Beirut, Lebanon – August 15, 10:00 a.m.

Camille and William sat smugly at the small conference table in Camille’s office, sipping hot, sweet tea as they watched the news by the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation. Yesterday, they had seen live footage of the shooting of Hassan Nasrallah. This footage had been broadcast all over the world. It was on the internet and the major television stations. Over and over again the world saw Nasrallah’s head split open like an overripe melon. Several people had actually taken footage of different stages of the mayhem with their cell phone cameras and were posting them everywhere. Of course, the Kataeb Party was one of the first to denounce the assassination as a ”despicable act of murder that had a destabilizing effect on Lebanon and the region.” Hezbollah remained strangely silent since the attack. As Camille and William watched the television, a breaking story flashed.

“What could be any more ‘breaking’ than the death of Nasrallah?” Camille wondered aloud. Hassan Nasrallah appeared on the screen, surrounded by a ring of reporters and armed guards. Camille's and William's jaws dropped.

"Yesterday, unknown killers tried to assassinate me and silence the Party of God. As you can see, they did not succeed and the representative of Allah is still here. Hezbollah will find the jackals who murdered scores of our people and we will not rest until justice is served. This I can promise you. This is a perfect example of how the current government in Lebanon is incapable of protecting its people, incapable of providing law and order, and incapable of governing this country." Nasrallah stared icily into the camera until the image was cut and the LBC newsman returned. Camille and William stared at each other in disbelief.

"Are you kidding me?" William managed to get out first.

"Didn't we get him?" Camille exclaimed. "I saw his fat head explode on the TV screen myself!"

"I don't know. Maybe the person we just saw wasn't Nasrallah, maybe someone who looked like him." William's mind worked in overdrive as he analyzed the possibilities.

"Or, maybe that wasn't Nasrallah yesterday, only someone who looked like him!" Camille didn't want to believe it.

"You mean a body double? A fucking look alike!?!" William was incredulous.

"Why not? That bastard Saddam used a double all the time. And I know Khomeini did too. They duped us!" Camille was incredulous. They had executed a flawless, forensically secure assassination of the wrong person. Hezbollah's counter-sniper measures had bought their Secretary General a new lease on life.

Chapter 12

Invisible Death

Sniping in Stalingrad

Any discussion of modern urban sniping starts with Stalingrad, located on the banks of the Volga River, where Europe ends and Asia begins. The battle of Stalingrad, fought from September 1942 until February 1943, was the bloodiest urban conflict in the history of human warfare. Over the course of this brutal contest between the invading German armed forces (the Wehrmacht) and the defending Soviet Red Army, more than two million soldiers and civilians were killed, wounded, or captured. Estimates of German casualties and their allies hover at 800,000, while the Russians suffered well over one million in losses. One will never know the Russians' exact casualty numbers because Stalin made the official figures a state secret, calculating his battered people would think the cost too high.

To the men who bled in Stalingrad's streets, these enormous casualties meant the life expectancy of the average Russian soldier was less than twenty-four hours. The fighting in the city was so fierce German soldiers intentionally shot themselves, often firing through a loaf of bread in order to hide any incriminating powder burns on their skin, hoping their "home wound" would get them sent out of the terrible city and to a rear area hospital. Battlefield desertions were so serious for the Russians that Stalin's secret police, the NKVD, executed almost 15,000 soldiers for cowardice, an entire division's worth of men. The men on both sides were pushed past the normal limits of human endurance and suffered ghastly emotional, mental, and physical wounds.

Russian soldiers approaching the city saw from afar what looked like Dante's inferno, as Viktor Kartashev, a cadet in the 193rd Rifle Division, noted, "On the horizon ahead of us, there was a continuous glow. It was Stalingrad burning. By day it smoldered and smoked, and by night it blazed brightly."[11] And what was awesome from afar was horrifying up close. Russian soldier Nikolai Maznista of the 95th Rifle Division described his experience in the center of Stalingrad: “The slopes of the Kurgan were completely covered in corpses. In some places you had to move two or three bodies aside to lie down. They quickly began to decompose, and the stench was appalling, but you just had to lie down and pay no attention.”[12] For the German soldiers the situation was equally bleak as a Panzer crewmember described: “It was a ghastly, wearisome battle both on the ground and below the ground, amid the ruins and in the basements of that large city, in its industrial quarter. The tanks tottered over mountains of rubble and broken bricks, they screeched as they picked their way through the factory workshops, shooting at short range down blocked streets and in crowded factory yards.”[13]

Stalingrad was bombed into a lunar hellscape.

One element contributing to the astronomical casualty rates and the brain-numbing battlefield stress was the urban sniper. During the first weeks of the battle, the Red Army - pulverized by the Luftwaffe’s planes, pounded by German artillery, and pressed by assaulting panzers – was slaughtered at a fearsome rate. In a desperate bid to turn the tide of a losing battle, Russian commanders found an improbable answer to German firepower: the lone rifleman. Through sheer necessity and chance, the Red Army discovered the urban sniper, hidden amidst Stalingrad’s bombed out buildings and smoking ruins, could exact a serious toll on their German foe.

From early on, Russian snipers forced the Germans to take extreme caution in the city, lest they fall victim to a carefully placed bullet to the head. As a result, the constant menace of invisible snipers forced the Germans underground for protection. This sub-surface existence gave rise to a miserable *Rattenkrieg* or a “war of the rats”. Meanwhile, Russian propaganda companies reminded the Germans of what lurked above, announcing through their cold metal loudspeakers, “every seven seconds a German soldier dies in Russia.” Even though both sides employed snipers in the tortured city, it was the Red Army who embraced their widespread employment to even the odds and stave off annihilation.

Red Army: the Right Men, The Right Time

Under the cloak of darkness, on the night of September 19th, 1942, the Red Army ferried most of Lieutenant-Colonel Batyuk’s 284th Infantry Division across the Volga and into the city. The fighting in the city itself raged for a week, ever since the German Sixth Army made its first push into central and southern Stalingrad on September 13th. The 284th Division, composed mostly of Siberians, came in the dead of night because the Luftwaffe made daylight crossings suicidal. Any boat caught in the open water while the sun was still up was sure to be gutted by the Luftwaffe’s dive bombers - the dreaded Stukas. Once the men of the 284th made it to the relative safety of the far shore, they dug into the ruins for cover.

One of these soldiers was a short, stout young man who was drafted into the Soviet navy as a payroll clerk. His name was Vassili Zaitsev. Zaitsev had no formal sniper training, but he hunted wild game in the dark, thick forests of the Ural Mountains where he grew up. Zaitsev, just one soldier in a 10,000-man division, was thrown into the Russian lines as just another expendable rifleman with a predictably short life expectancy. However, Zaitsev, the natural hunter, excelled in the Stalingrad inferno and managed to shoot forty Germans in a ten-day period. Zaitsev and his 7.62 mm Mosin-Nagant 1890/31 bolt-action rifle made a deadly pair.

While Zaitsev zeroed in on the Germans, General Vasili I. Chuikov, commander of the Soviet 62nd Army, was busy organizing the city’s defense. Chuikov, a plain speaking, strong-willed man, intended to hold the city at all costs. This unwavering determination ultimately kept the Russians’ defenses from falling apart under a frightful onslaught. Importantly, Chuikov understood the Red Army’s methods on the Eastern Front, up to that point, ensured repeated failures. In an effort to reverse these costly defeats, Chuikov studied the Germans' tactics during their summer drive across the Ukraine towards Stalingrad. Chuikov was determined to find a way to limit the Germans' strengths and exploit their weaknesses. Consequently, as Zaitsev was making a name for himself as a sniper, Chuikov took notice as he was eager to try new methods that could hold off the surging Germans. Without any prompting, Chuikov seized on Zaitsev's success and supported the development of an aggressive sniper program. The combination of Zaitsev's skill and Chuikov's innovative mind proved to be the perfect union leading to the Russians' widespread use of snipers in Stalingrad.

Once Zaitsev proved his mettle as a marksman, he was directed to establish a sniper school so more Russian shooters could learn his tactics. Zaitsev set up this sniper school at the Lazur Chemical Factory located in the central part of the city. The Lazur, although bombed into a lunar landscape by the Luftwaffe, was one of the few areas of Stalingrad still in Russian hands. In one of the long industrial buildings of the Lazur, Zaitsev created a rifle range. Pictures of soldiers, helmets, and bunker slits were painted on the wall, giving Zaitsev's initial thirty students targets to shoot at. As the students shot at their make-believe enemy, Zaitsev instructed them on their form. After their brief introduction to marksmanship amidst the rubble of the Lazur, Zaitsev took his students out on live missions for the second phase of their sniping education – on the job training.[14]

Russians defending the massive grain elevator held up the German advance for an entire week.

This training of new snipers meshed with Chuikov's guidance to make every German soldier feel like, "they were living under the muzzle of a gun". The Germans definitely lived under the muzzle of Zaitsev's gun, as he managed to shoot some 242 of the enemy in Stalingrad. Several of Zaitsev's students achieved even more success, like Viktor Medvedev and Anatoli Chekov, who were each credited with killing hundreds of Germans apiece. Zaitsev also trained women snipers who proved to be as effective as their male counterparts. One of these female snipers, Tania Chernova, who fell in love with Zaitsev, went on to kill eighty Germans after receiving her training in the Lazur.[15] For the Germans, Zaitsev was a virus, growing in the Stalingrad Petri dish, infecting other Russians with his deadly skills. Zaitsev, and the snipers he personally trained, eventually accounted for over 3,000 German deaths during the course of the war.

The Russians also seized on what they called the 'Sniper Movement' to shore up the Red Army's morale. The Red Army's daily newspaper In Our Country's Defense trumpeted their snipers' successes, published daily tallies of their kills, and proudly displayed their pictures. The Soviets' political organizations also became actively involved in supporting and promoting the Sniper Movement in Stalingrad. Officials as high ranking as Stalingrad Front Commander Colonel-General Andrei Yeremenko and famed commissar Nikita Krushchev took personal interest in promoting the Sniper Movement. As a result, the Russian snipers received direct support from the highest levels of their military and political command.[16]

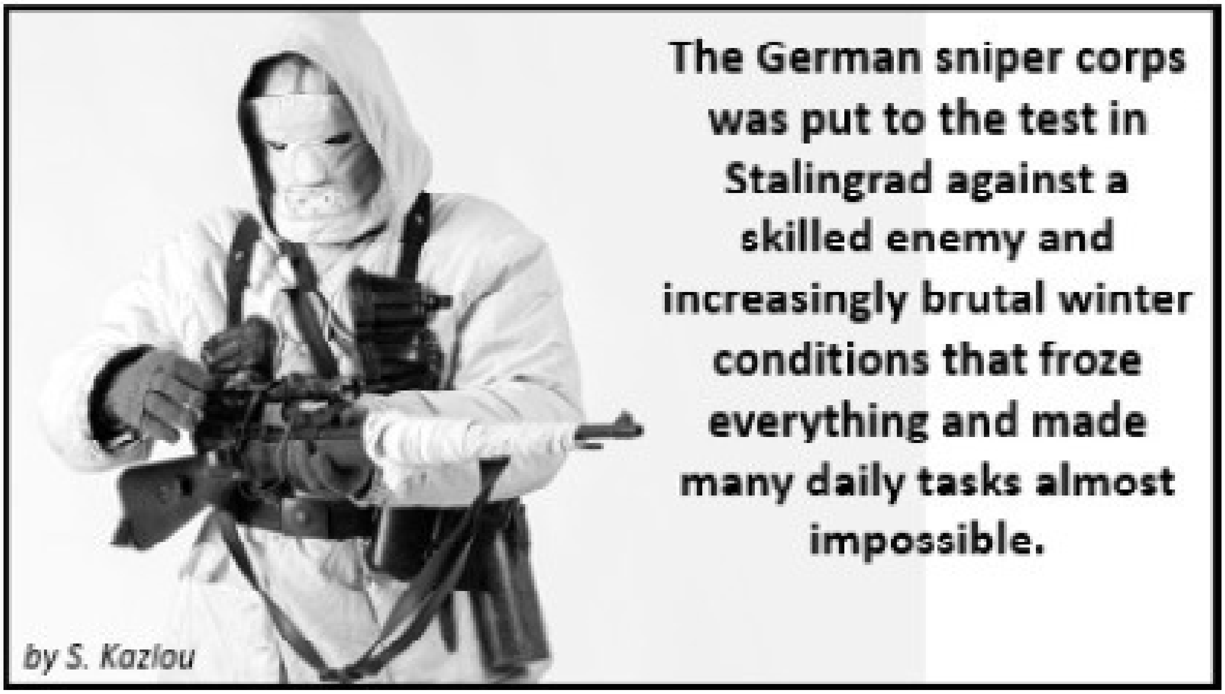
What did this trained group of snipers amount to on the battlefield? How did they affect the Germans fighting and scraping their way forward through the ruins? German First Lieutenant Herbert Rauchhaupt, whose battalion was attacking the Red October factory, wrote an account of the deadly effects the Red Army snipers had on the exhausted, bleeding, German Sixth Army: “Suddenly two shots whiz by us from the left and hit the wall of Hall 5 some paces to our right. Luckily there is a deep bomb crater right at the foot of the factory hall. Into it – cover! Damn, where are those shots coming from? Here it is again, this eerie, horrid war, as it is being waged in Stalingrad for weeks. Not openly and honestly, but invisibly, sneakily, furtively and hidden. We crawl up to the other edge of the four meters deep crater and carefully peek over the edge. Twenty meters in front of us the soldier stands behind the wall that is jutting out. ‘Which way to the fight?’ we shout at him. ‘Straight down the works road!’ So we’re in the right place! Then he comes from behind the corner of the wall for our crater. At the same moment it whizzes over our steel helmets and hits an iron beam that has fallen to our right. We pull our heads in. The soldier appears over us, one moment he waits at the edge of the crater to jump in – patsch – again a shot! Head first the soldier tumbles down to us in the crater. Hit! Headshot! Dead! In the invisible battle for Stalingrad there are nearly only headshots. We are cornered in a trap.”[17]

German Sniping

While we know from accounts like that of Lieutenant Rauchhaupt that the Red Army’s sniping efforts in the city were effective, what was the Germans’ sniping program like? For a variety of reasons there is little literature on the subject. Peter Senich’s book *The German Sniper 1914-1945* does not mention one word about the German Sixth Army and their struggle in Stalin’s city. Breaker

McCoy's *Death by Precision Fire: The World War II German Sniper* is equally silent. Even Jason Mark's definitive works on the battle, *Death of the Leaping Horsemen* and *Island of Fire*, only offer fleeting glimpses of the German marksmen.

Ironically, some of the most detailed accounts of German snipers are from the Russians themselves who suffered from their carefully placed shots. Some historians argue this lack of information is because all of the German snipers were captured or killed when the Russians surrounded and captured what was left of the Sixth Army in February 1943. Upsetting this theory is the tens of thousands of Germans who were evacuated from Stalingrad during the battle and the very detailed unit histories of the organizations who actually fought in Stalingrad, which survived the war. Perhaps we must accept the fact, as discussed in chapter three, the Germans' sniping efforts in Stalingrad simply did not achieve the same level of importance.


The German sniper corps was put to the test in Stalingrad against a skilled enemy and increasingly brutal winter conditions that froze everything and made many daily tasks almost impossible.

by S. Kazlou

While the German senior leadership did not appreciate the full potential of the urban sniper, their usefulness was recognized by the combat units fighting and dying inside the city. The staff of the 24th Panzer Division wrote a report entitled Experiences Fighting in Stalingrad, noting snipers should be used to support infantry assaults and units suffered much lower casualties when snipers actively supported their operations.[18] Other units employed snipers not just to support their assaults, but for attrition warfare. For instance, during the early fighting in September, the Germans managed to work snipers far enough forward to target the Russian rear lines in the northern factory district, allowing them to observe Russian movements between the Barrikady and Krasny Oktyabr factories. These snipers killed so many Russians trying to cross a washout between the factories, the Russians referred to this crossing as "the gully of death." Only after the Russians built a stone wall for protection could they move back and forth with a reasonable chance of survival.[19]

Other Russian soldiers found themselves under German crosshairs as well. Vasily Sokolov, a lieutenant in the Soviet naval infantry, recounted a particularly close call with a hidden German sniper that missed him, but killed some of his comrades. "It was the 26th or 27th (September 1942) and three of us had to go from the command post of the 62nd Army back to our own 92nd Brigade. There was me, Lieutenant Zhurba who was the adjutant of the brigade commander, and one soldier who was accompanying us. Before we reached the sector of the 13th Guards, we caught sight of a sergeant sitting on the ground some distance away. He was wounded. We asked him: where are you hit and what is your unit? He made a gesture with his hand and said: 'I was crossing this open patch of ground about half an hour ago when I was hit in the leg by a German sniper.'

The sergeant told us that he was from the 92nd Brigade. A short time ago, he had seen the German sniper kill two of our men, even though the sergeant had shouted to them not to come over as there was a sniper in the building nearby. Sure enough, there were a couple of bodies lying not far from us.

As for us, we still had to get across the area controlled by the sniper, as we could not go back without having carried out our orders. I decided to make a run for it first. I hunched up, thought to myself 'what will be will be', and dashed across the square and down the steep bank.

The German didn't shoot. Lieutenant Zhurba made his run next, and then the soldier who was with us. Again, the sniper didn't shoot.

Either he was taking a nap, or he didn’t get us in his sights quickly enough.

We found ourselves lying in the midst of fifteen or so corpses, our people. There was one woman among them – most likely a medic. Only the torso was there: her head, arms, and legs had been torn off, probably by the blast of a bomb or a shell. Three of the bodies were in a sitting position, leaning against the high bank, almost as if they were asleep.

Two signalers now came our way. They were dragging a drum of cable with them. I advised them to run across the sniper’s field as quickly as they possibly could (‘Fly like a bullet!’ I said). I thought they had got my meaning, but they didn’t seem to go any faster for it. Maybe the drum of cable slowed them down. While they were on their way across the square, two or three shots rang out. They were dum-dum bullets – I knew because you always get a puff of smoke with an explosive bullet. Both soldiers went down. They looked to be dead, but we didn’t go near them because we would certainly have been killed ourselves. We went on our way to Brigade HQ.”[20]

In another case, during an assault on the Barrikady Gun Factory in October, German radio specialist Heinz Neist and his squad secured the bottom floor of an industrial building, while the Russians occupied the top floor. The two groups fought for days over the lone stairwell in the building, with neither side daring to venture up or down the deadly stairs. Neist, trapped in the building with his men, called in reinforcements. Help came in the form of friendly snipers who took roost in a building opposite their own. These German snipers had perfect view of the Russian squad barricaded in the upper floor. After observing their prey, the snipers opened fire, picking off the Russians one at a time. By the time Neist and his squad snuck up the stairs to search the upper floor, they found seven Russian soldiers lying on the floor, all dead from the snipers’ well-aimed bullets.[21]

A German infantry squad prepares to move into the Red October Tractor Factory.

In the northern factory district near the Barrikady Gun factory, snipers were crucial for interdicting Russian reinforcements and their accompanying supplies coming across the now-frozen Volga River. As groups of much needed Russian replacements tried to cross the Volga in early December and shore up the beleaguered Soviet 138th Rifle division, German snipers picked off scores of victims who were caught out on the open ice. One of these snipers who gave the

Russian command fits was Oberleutnant Hans Wegener, a junior leader of Pazerjager-Abteilung 389 who said, “We had the possibility of shooting over the Volga with our telescopic-equipped carbines. We German snipers were at least as good as the Russians!”[22]

After the Germans became encircled in Stalingrad, the sniper grew in importance because of the dire supply situation. Since all ammunition was flown into the city on the Luftwaffe’s dwindling numbers of aircraft, the Germans were forced use their ammunition sparingly. The supply situation was so bad some German battalion commanders became the only ones who could authorize their men to open fire. Taking this logistical starvation into account, the sniper became the most economical weapon in the arsenal. While the use of mortars was cut back and machine-gunners began rationing their ammo, the snipers continued their deadly work, one bullet at a time.

On November 13, a Russian soldier noted, “After a few hours, a German sniper – within the span of about 5-6 minutes – killed four of our men, three of them were sergeants and one officer. I spotted the German sniper sitting between a brick chimney and some metal on the roof, not far from us (60-70 meters).”[23] Two days later Russian Senior-Sergeant Gorbatenko was defending his regimental command post, “At midday I was standing at the ready with soldiers on the second floor. We fired two cartridges toward the Germans. When the third jammed, snipers hit the soldiers at the embrasures.”[24]

On December 19th, when two Russians soldiers were taking a German soldier prisoner they came under accurate fire. “They had just approached the first trench positions of the 650th Regiment when machine-gun fire suddenly erupted from the basement of the corner house. Snipers also opened fire from the same building. Grigoriev managed to quickly jump into the trench, dragging the ‘tongue’ behind him. Petukhov was hit by a sniper’s bullet. He released the rope and fell near the trench. The German sniper shot him two more times.”[25]

A Target Rich Environment

As these accounts indicate, the urban war in Stalingrad, with tens of thousands of soldiers crammed into a geographically small area, offered snipers many potential targets. Russian sniper Anatoli Chekov regularly targeted German soldiers bringing rations up to the front lines.[26] These soldiers, carrying heavy food containers in both hands, preoccupied with getting food to their comrades, were slow moving targets. As soon as one of these men was shot, they became bait for other soldiers trying to rescue them. In this manner, a sniper could get two or three kills in the space of a few minutes. Other tempting targets were German soldiers on water detail, where a soldier carrying an armful of empty bottles became another prized kill. Not only did the sniper kill the targeted soldier, but the soldier's comrades now had to endure unbearable thirst.

General Chuikov inspects Zaitsev's sniper rifle.

Key members of both armies were intentionally targeted like artillery observers, radio operators, machine-gunners, other snipers, and officers. If a sniper could remove these critical personnel, the enemy's unit would cease to function as a cohesive organization. Surprisingly, prime targets for Russian snipers were German panzers. Because panzer crews suffered from such poor situational awareness in the claustrophobic confines of the city, they often stuck their heads outside of their steel hatches to communicate with adjacent infantry units and to get a better view of their surroundings. As soon as the panzer crews exposed themselves, hidden snipers picked off these now vulnerable targets. With a single shot to the head of a panzer commander, a sniper could shut down an entire crew. Also, Russian snipers were instructed to shoot out the glass vision ports on the panzers, blinding the crews. With their vision ports shattered, panzer crews became more vulnerable to other threats like anti-tank guns and dug-in T-34 tanks.

The Russians were so aggressive in their use of snipers, they tried to kill the commander of the German Sixth Army himself, General Friedrich Paulus. On December 13th, Russian intelligence units thought they had pinpointed Paulus' command bunker inside the city. A four-person sniper team was dispatched to kill him. One of the snipers was Tania Chernova and another was her teacher, Zaitsev. While the team picked its way through the rubble and snow, ever weary of German sentries, the lead girl in the team stepped on an unseen land mine. Tania was seriously wounded by the resulting blast and Zaitsev had to carry her back to a field hospital for immediate surgery. The attempt to eliminate Paulus with a single well-aimed shot was over. Unknown to them, their intelligence was faulty and Paulus was miles away, outside of the city at Gumrak airfield.[27]

Urban Snipercraft

Tania and Zaitsev's attempt to kill Paulus revealed that movement in the city was serious business. Death could come from anywhere: another sniper, an artillery observer, a minefield, a pilot looking earthward, or any number of enemy machine-gun positions, trenches, pillboxes, bunkers, and strongpoints. Since foot movement could be a death warrant, snipers made use of the available cover, which included moving through basements, trenches, and the shells of bombed out structures. The ideal way to travel was over a route providing protection from observation. Although this was not usually available, Zaitsev was able to move undetected at various times using a building's air duct, another time by crawling through a heating duct, and still other times moving through the empty pipes of a petrol storage yard. In Stalingrad, to be seen was to be killed.

After a sniper made it safely to a specific area, the city's complex urban terrain, made even more chaotic by its destruction, offered the sniper an endless number of positions to shoot from. Russian snipers, for example, found excellent positions atop the towering smokestacks of the Barrikady gun factory. Because the Barrikady's giant Martin furnaces were located underground, the Russians were able to get inside them and climb to the tops of the smokestacks unseen by the Germans. Once in these lofty perches, the snipers held a dominating view of the surrounding city. For weeks on end, Russian snipers picked off their enemy from the tops of these chimneys, impervious to German counterfire. Finally, in early November, the Germans brought up newly commissioned SIG33B assault guns and emplaced them in front of the Barrikady. Once in position, the SIG33Bs pumped round after round of 150 mm high-explosive shells straight into the massive smokestacks. Even these huge chimneys could not withstand such firepower and they collapsed in an avalanche of rubble.[28]

As the dead men in the smokestacks could attest to, once in position, the sniper had to be able to observe the terrain and still remain undetected. Zaitsev remained invisible from the Germans through the use of a trench periscope he carried with him. Once Zaitsev was in position, he never showed more than the unobtrusive tip of his periscope to assess his surroundings. While enemy soldiers exposed their positions with sunlight reflecting off their binoculars and rifle scopes, they never saw Zaitsev. He understood the slightest movement or exposure before, or even after a shot, could give his position away. In an example of this, a German sniper once exposed himself to Zaitsev by reaching out to collect his expended brass after he made a shot.[29]

The first production run of SIG 33Bs were shipped to Stalingrad to destroy the Factory District.

To increase the chance for survival, both sides used deception, like raising helmets above trench lines and windowsills to make it look like a soldier was exposing themselves. The goal was to get the enemy to shoot in order to expose their position. When Zaitsev employed these methods, he always examined the bullet hole in the helmet he had raised to determine from what angle the bullet came from. If the enemy sniper did not fall for the helmet trick, then Zaitsev used a full-sized dummy to try and coax a shot from them. Dummies were also good for making the enemy think a sniper was still in a certain position even though he had moved to another. Germans and Russians alike built dummy positions to include fake pillboxes, foxholes, and bunkers that were unoccupied, except for a dummy. Snipers then mixed the fake positions with real, camouflaged sniper hides. These multiple positions gave a sniper the ability to make a shot from one location and then move quickly to another position to observe their enemy.

Hiding the Shot

While moving undetected to a camouflaged position was critical, so was making the actual shot in an inconspicuous manner. For example, machine-gunners firing tracer rounds were easily spotted and had a low survival rate. Soldiers who fired their rifles and allowed their muzzle flashes to be seen were also vulnerable to enemy observation. Soldiers who fired repeated shots from the same position were susceptible to detection from the sound of their gunshots alone. Zaitsev observed one German sniper who killed four Russians in a few hours because the sniper worked in conjunction with several submachine gunners. When the submachine gunners fired, the sniper fired his shot. In this manner, the firing of the submachine gunners masked the sound of the German sniper's own gunshot.[30]

Zaitsev used the sounds of the battlefield to hide his gunshots and he fired in daylight to hide his muzzle flash. Russian sniper Anatoli Chekov fabricated his own flash hider that he affixed to the end of his sniper rifle to help hide the muzzle blast of his measures were not always enough to save him. Many times, Zaitsev took a shot and then immediately left the area to avoid German reprisals like mortar barrages, artillery bombardment, and air strikes. Zaitsev knew to shoot and move after one or two shots to avoid getting pinned down or obliterated. Chekov, like Zaitsev, was careful never to fire in bad light where his muzzle flash could be easily seen. When he could, Chekov fired in front of white colored walls so his muzzle flash would be washed out to the casual observer.[31] Exposure in Stalingrad, either from muzzle flashes or the sound of gunshots, meant death.

Tania Chernov and a team of fellow snipers learned the importance of concealing their shots when they worked the Krasny Oktyabr area of the northern factory district sometime in October. During this particular mission, Tania and her group surveyed the terrain and established a sniper hide in the upper story of a building, behind a pile of bricks. From their perch, they watched the German front lines for hours. Then, a German assault group came into the open, completely exposed. Tania and the other snipers, unable to resist such a lucrative target, opened fire and gunned down seventeen Germans. However, the snipers' shots exposed their position, enabling the Germans to pinpoint them. Minutes later, artillery shells screamed in and collapsed the entire structure. Tania managed to escape, but the rest were killed from the hot shrapnel of the bursting shells and the massive weight of the collapsing building.[32]

A Red Army soldier aims his PRTD-1 anti-tank rifle.

Sniping Innovation

Because the fighting in Stalingrad often took place up close, unconventional sniping methods could be used. At a hundred meters, the average rifleman, with no sniper training or scope, could accurately hit a target. What made this soldier a sniper was their understanding of urban warfare tactics, not their extremely accurate rifle. Adelbert Holl, a member of the German 94th Infantry Division, found himself in the roll of sniper even though he was armed only with the standard-issue 7.92 mm Mauser Karbiner 98. One day, as Holl and his unit fought their way through southern Stalingrad, he spied some Russian soldiers 150 meters away in a building. The

Russians were going up and down some stairs but were exposed by a hole in the wall of their building. Holl took aim over the iron sights of his rifle from his concealed position and shot four Russians through the hole in the wall. An hour later, Holl shot a Russian messenger as he ran across an open square to where his comrades were just killed. At these short distances, Holl was just as effective as a sniper with formal training and a specialized rifle.[33]

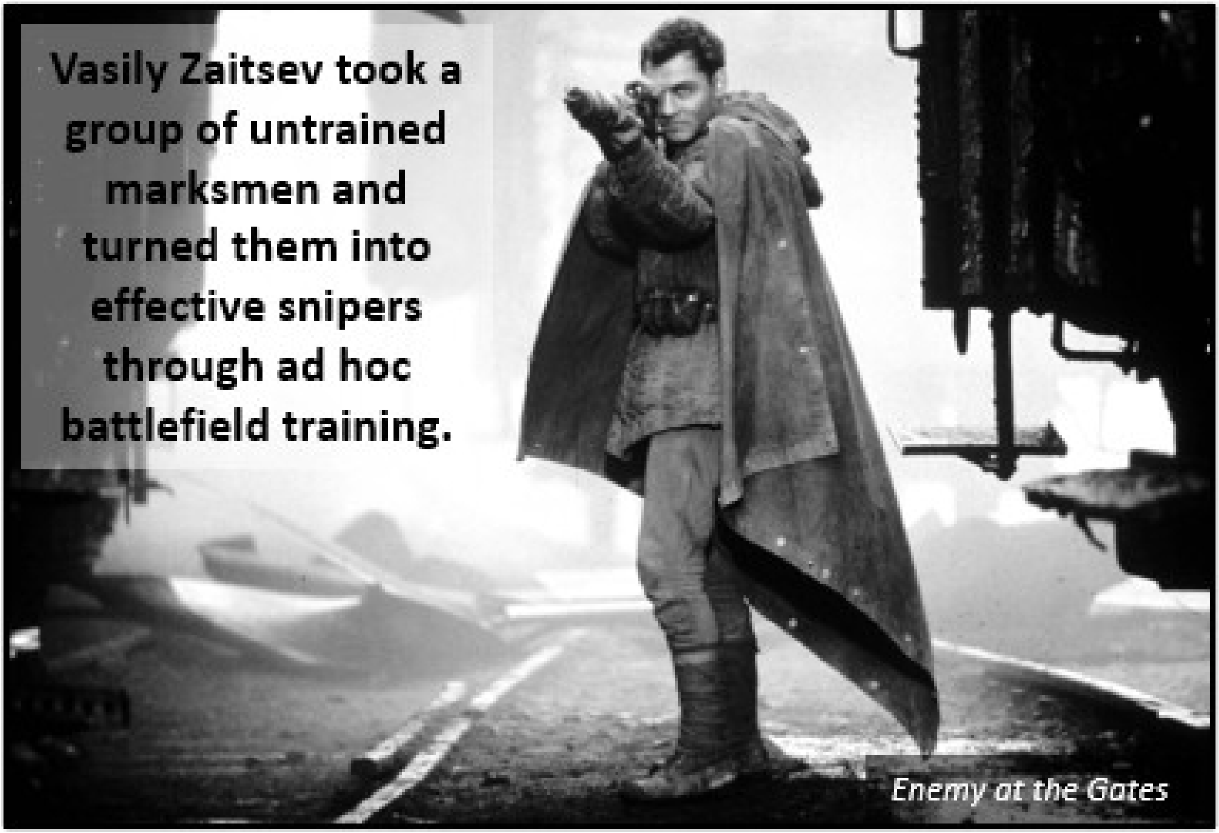
The intense urban combat of Stalingrad also spurred sniper innovation in other ways, like employing anti-tank rifles for sniping. In fact, both sides employed bolt-action, anti-tank rifles for sniping. Zaitsev himself tested the Russian-made PTRD-1 14.5 mm anti-tank rifle as a sniper's tool. The PTRD-1 was not often employed as a sniper rifle because of its weight (over 35 pounds), its enormous muzzle blast/flash, and its inaccuracy as compared to purpose-built sniper rifles. (These men did not know it at the time, but they were pioneering the first heavy-caliber sniper rifles, which would only come into popularity fifty years later in the 1990s.)

However, Adelbert Holl employed a captured PTRD-1 for sniping when the situation demanded it. One such situation arose as Holl and his unit attacked through the Barrikady workers settlement. During the assault, Holl encountered a Russian team firing a machine-gun through a hole in a wall. After pinpointing the position, Holl brought forward the bulky PRTD-1 and fired a single round into the machine-gun position, silencing it.[34] Although pinpoint accuracy was not possible with the inherently inaccurate PRTD-1, relatively large targets located close to the shooter were sitting ducks.

A good sniper also had to be a good counter-sniper. Zaitsev, for one, consistently located enemy snipers through an established process combining battlefield questioning, forensic investigation, ballistic analysis, and his own understanding of sniping. By analyzing the way his fellow soldiers were shot by German snipers, Zaitsev reverse engineered the circumstances of the shooting. In this manner, Zaitsev turned every sniper victim into a potential counter-sniper operation. Zaitsev described such a situation where German snipers gunned down a Russian artillery observation team concealed in some factory smokestacks.

His investigation started by interviewing fellow Russian soldiers who saw their comrades hit by the German snipers. Zaitsev asked these eyewitnesses to draw maps showing exactly where the dead spotters were located and how they were killed. From studying these drawings and listening to the after action reports of the shootings, Zaitsev made an educated guess as to the angle the German bullets were fired from. After backtracking the trajectory of the bullets from the smokestacks, Zaitsev determined the position the German sharpshooters most likely shot from. Aiding in the investigation were the deceased spotters' own periscope, which had bullet holes in it, and allowed for further analysis of the bullets' trajectory.

Zaitsev partitioned his disciplined investigation into two parts. The first part, as described by his questioning about the artillery observer shooting, was to study the circumstances of the shooting. An especially valuable tool in this first stage were the field medics who became expert at recognizing different kinds of battlefield injuries and were intimately familiar with gunshot wounds. Once Zaitsev completed his homework, he knew where to search for his foe. This ended the first investigative stage and signaled the beginning of the second stage of his counter-sniper operation.


Vasily Zaitsev took a group of untrained marksmen and turned them into effective snipers through ad hoc battlefield training.
Enemy at the Gates

The next stage was the actual physical search for the enemy shooter. Zaitsev would carefully move to an observation point where he could analyze the suspected enemy sniper hide. He conducted this methodical study of the enemy lines undetected because of his trusty trench periscope, which enabled him to remain invisible while he glassed the German lines. Zaitsev was aware some Russian snipers liked to use binoculars or their own rifle scopes to scan the enemy positions. Zaitsev thought this offered too much exposure and was much too risky since he knew thousands of German eyes were doing the same thing, scanning the Russian positions looking for someone one to make a mistake. Zaitsev summarized his detailed approach with the old adage, “measure seven times, cut once.” Zaitsev felt only a sniper who did their homework and conducted a thorough analysis of the situation had any business trying to take out an enemy sniper.[35]

While understanding the technical aspects of an enemy’s shot was important, so was reading the enemy’s patterns and behavior. Just as modern police forces conduct pattern analysis of violent criminals, Zaitsev too studied the behavior of his German foes. Zaitsev, after his experience in the Stalingrad cauldron, could ‘read’ certain enemy snipers from the way they operated: the kind of camouflage they used, the firing positions they chose, and the targets they selected. Zaitsev could quickly discern who were the more experienced, cunning snipers and who were novices.[36] As Zaitsev’s observations show, snipers from both sides became adept at judging each other’s relative sniping ability as well us identifying their enemy’s habits. No sniper could afford to become predictable or they would be studied, located, and then hunted down.

Since the Germans did not have the same number and quality of snipers as the Russians, discriminate counter-sniper operations, like the ones conducted by Zaitsev, were infrequent. Instead, the Germans responded with massive force to include the use of infantry assaults, mortars, artillery, air strikes, anti-tank guns, and tanks. When countering Russian snipers, the word ‘restraint’ did not enter the German vocabulary; they were simply unconcerned with civilian casualties or infrastructure damage. The Russian population unfortunate enough to remain in the city was stuck between the German hammer and Stalin’s anvil and was pounded. The Germans did not care about winning Russian popular support, did not care about minimizing infrastructure damage, and did not care about their image in the international community. Therefore, craftily hiding a Russian sniper amongst the populace failed to beget moderation. Before the fighting started in August 1942, the industrial city of Stalingrad had a civilian population of 850,000 people. At the end of the war, just 1,500 remained.[37]

However, as the Germans punished the city, obliterating hundreds of thousands of Russian civilians and soldiers in the process, they created problems. First, turning the city’s buildings into rubble did not stop Russian snipers from their deadly craft, the snipers merely burrowed into the mounds of debris like moles. Also, rubbling the city limited German mobility as they could not drive their panzers through the cluttered streets and their assaulting infantry units found fewer buildings to take cover in. Forward artillery observers had a harder time calling in accurate fire since their most prominent reference points were already flattened into the ground. In sum, as Germany’s blitzkrieg machine bogged down in Stalingrad’s ruins, the high intensity warfare tools that initially worked for countering the Russian snipers became less relevant. As a result, the Germans’ unrestrained and massive use of firepower actually made them more vulnerable to Russian snipers as opposed to less so.’’

The Soviet and German armies were both unprepared for the high-intensity urban warfare they experienced in Stalingrad. However, it was the Soviet 62nd Army that adapted more readily to their new concrete battlefield, as shown by their creation of the Sniper Movement. The Russians’ widespread use of urban snipers enabled them to exact a steady toll of casualties despite being outnumbered and outgunned. Importantly, there was no other battle in World War II, before or after Stalingrad, where urban sniping was practiced by both sides on such a large scale. Thus, the journey of any student of sniping will inevitably lead them to the bloody streets of Stalingrad, where desperate marksmen from the Red Army and the Wehrmacht dueled to the death amidst the scarred ruins of the city of steel.

Red Army soldiers celebrate the surrender of the German Sixth Army on February 2, 1943.

Chapter 13

The Dealey Plaza Snipers

Public figures or guarded officials may be killed with great reliability and some safety if a firing point can be established prior to an official occasion.

– "A Study of Assassination", a how-to manual allegedly written by the CIA

The committee believes, on the basis of the evidence available to it, that President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.

- From the U. S. House Select Committee On Assassinations (HSCA) 1979 report

The shot from the grassy knoll is not only supported by the acoustics, which is a tape that we found of a police motorcycle broadcast back to the district station. It is corroborated by eyewitness testimony in the plaza. There were 20 people, at least, who heard a shot from the grassy knoll.

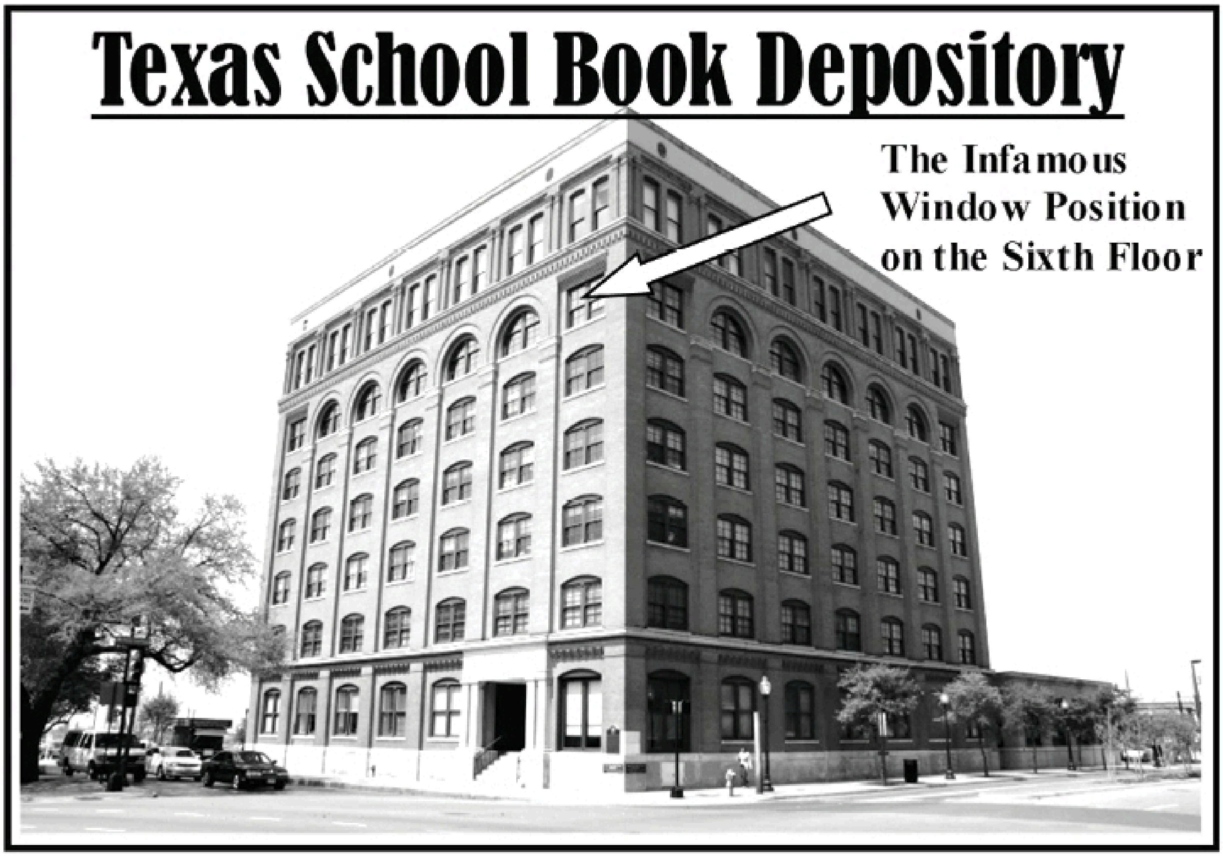
- G. Robert Blakey attorney for the HSCA

Balancing Operational Success With Deception

The Dealey Plaza snipers had two critical tasks: kill the President of the United States and make it look like Lee Harvey Oswald committed the murder. The assassins accomplished their first goal but failed at the second. The crux of their problem was in order to accomplish the first goal, they were unable to achieve the second. While the killers required redundant sniper teams to ensure the death of the President, by increasing the number of sniper teams, they multiplied the difficulties of concealing the evidence of the operation. In order for the snipers to effectively frame Oswald, they needed to conduct the assassination in a manner consistent with the "evidence" left behind for public consumption. However, this is precisely where they went wrong because the incriminating physical evidence meant to convict

Oswald did not match the actual events of the shooting.

What complicated the killers' efforts was the need to insulate the actual planners of the assassination from the operation itself. The most important aspect of this insulation was using contracted shooters, teams of snipers with deniable connections to the planners. These shooters took the form of hired guns from the Corsican mob, the American mob, Cuban exiles, and domestic trigger men. It was necessary to even insulate the individual sniper teams from one another, making the operation truly compartmented. This compartmentalization, while good from a security perspective, meant the separate sniper teams were forensically out of synch with each other. The resulting sloppiness compromised the overall operation.


Texas School Book Depository
The Infamous Window Position on the Sixth Floor

Preparation for the Assassination

The Kennedy killers had every opportunity to study their proposed kill zone in detail before the operation took place. This was because the President's plan to visit Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963, was published two months prior to the actual trip. Lee Harvey Oswald then secured a job at the Texas School Book Depository (TSBD) six weeks before the assassination. This makes Oswald's employment at the depository less like a random job to make ends meet and more like a long-term, pre-operation reconnaissance of the kill zone.

While Oswald had six weeks to pick out potential sniper platforms and study the terrain of Dealey Plaza, so did Dallas mobster Jack Ruby. Ruby (real name Jacob Rubenstein, a Polish-Jewish immigrant, and former employee of Al Capone), gained notoriety for killing Oswald on November 24, 1963, in front of a police escort of seventy armed officers. Ruby ran a sleazy nightclub and dealt illegal arms to both Castro and the anti-Castro Cuban opposition based in the United States. Ruby was the perfect front man to supply Mafia shooters with a local support network including safehouses, guns, and information about the area and the kill zone.

Author Craig Roberts' investigation into the assassination revealed one group of snipers from the Corsican mob infiltrated Texas through the Mexican-American border and set up at a local safehouse in Dallas, avoiding incriminating hotel receipts. This contracted team of Frenchmen entered the country only with the help of the American mob, which got them across the border. After their arrival, the Corsican shooters took detailed photographs of the kill zone and studied them in-depth at their safehouse. One of these shooters, Lucien Sarti, is believed by many researches to be the man in the police uniform who hit President Kennedy with the final, fatal head shot from the northern grassy knoll position.

Because the United States was not under martial law, anyone could walk freely wherever they wanted with absolutely no interference from the military or local law enforcement. In any open society, criminals can case potential targets with ease. The situation was no different in Dallas in November 1963. The various sniper teams walked freely in Dealey Plaza itself before the operation to personally inspect their future sniper positions. This aspect of the operation was the easiest, because the shooters could go where they wanted to collect the information they needed for their part of the operation.

The Problem of Compartmentalization

Most likely, the separate sniper teams planned their individual pieces of the operation in isolation from one another. This isolation would be intentional to ensure there was no incriminating link between the separate shooters and organizations. Since the separate teams had no physical contact with one another, their ability to communicate with one another was difficult. Meeting in person would not be advisable, nor would discussing the plans on the phone. While there were many ways to communicate with one another once they were all in Dallas, they probably communicated through the means of cutouts.

These cutouts were responsible for communicating the overall plan to the sniper teams and ensuring they were all in synch, operationally. The cutouts would be skilled in counter-surveillance and their sole job would be passing information to the various groups in a secure manner so no connection could be made either between the separate sniper teams or the planners themselves.

While the need for operational security is understandable, a compartmented operation is vulnerable to problems like miscommunications and a lack of coordination. Compartmentalization means the separate sniper teams never got a chance to rehearse their plan together. Rehearsals are crucial for shaking out a plan and identifying problems that may arise in the actual operation. Because the different groups never rehearsed together, they made serious errors during the execution of the assassination. A realistic rehearsal, while physically connecting the separate sniper teams to one another, would have resulted in a more forensically sound operation. Clearly, the planners balanced the need for security with hiding the evidence of the operation and ultimately failed in their balancing act.

The Dealey Plaza Kill Zone

No final plan to kill the President could be made until a proposed kill zone was chosen. The place was Dealey Plaza. Dealey Plaza was a good location because it was an open area and allowed observation of the Presidential motorcade from all directions. When observed from above, the plaza is symmetrical, a mirror image with

Main Street dividing it down the middle, running east to west. With Main Street as the central dividing line, Elm Street to the north and Commerce Street to the south form the Dealey Plaza boundaries. This near symmetry means while there is a grassy knoll on the north side of the plaza adjacent to Elm Street, there is also a grassy knoll on the south side of the Plaza adjacent to Commerce Street.

Oswald's alleged sniper position hidden by boxes.

While the road layout in the Plaza is symmetrical, the surrounding building layout is not. The intersection of Houston and Elm Street in the northern half of the plaza is surrounded by tall buildings: the Dal-Tex (Dallas Textile) Building, the Dallas County Records Building, the County Courthouse Building, and the Texas School Book Depository (TSBD). The southern intersection of Houston and Commerce Street does not have this same dominating layout of buildings. For instance, the Old Red Courthouse across Main Street from the County Courthouse building is several stories shorter and has few windows on the west side facing the Plaza. Also, the Old Red Courthouse has a steep-sloped ornate roof, not a flat one that could be used by a shooter. In general, the Houston-Commerce Street intersection is more open with fewer quality sniper positions to choose from. If a team of snipers had to make a choice, they would choose the Houston-Elm Street intersection because it gives them more options.

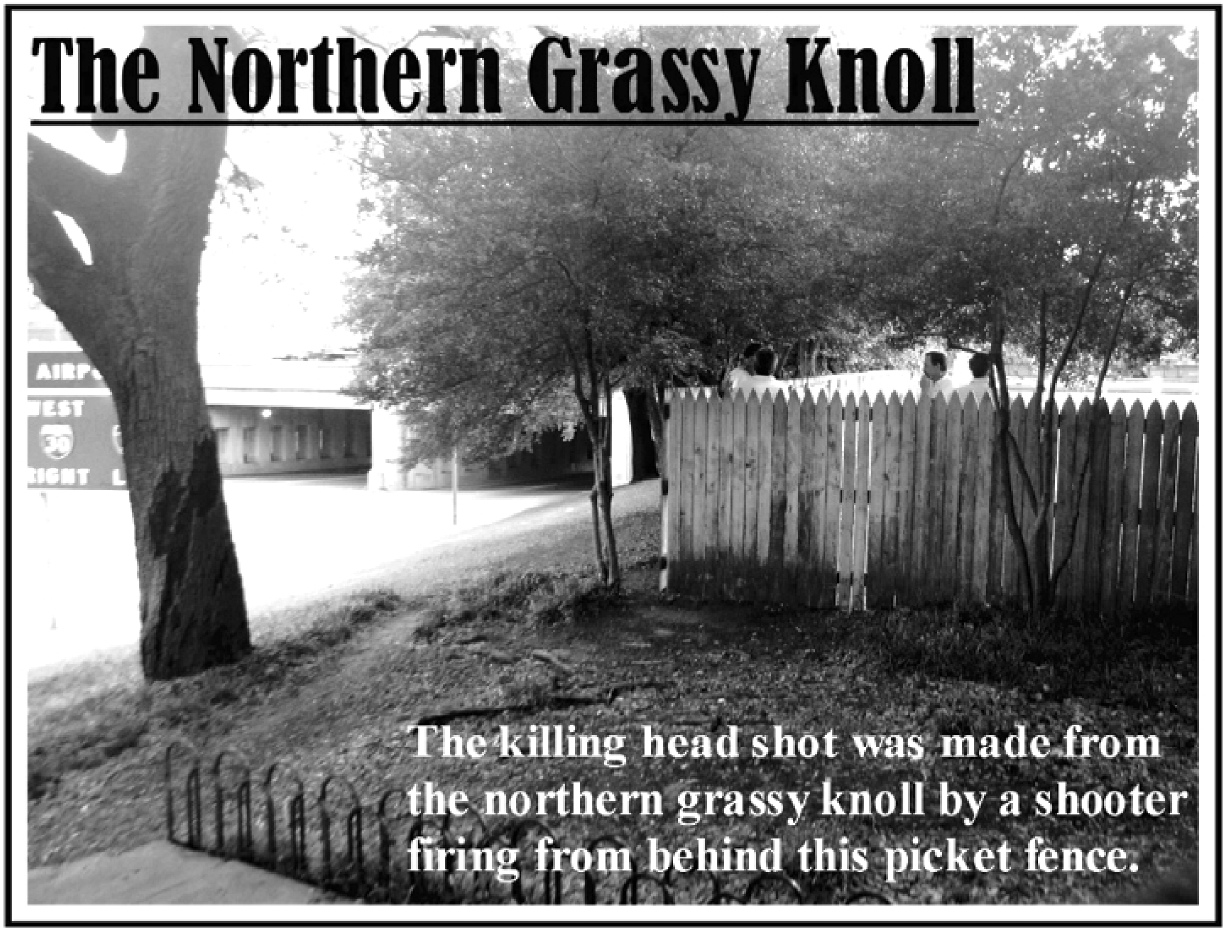
At the Houston-Elm Street intersection sits the Texas School Book Depository (TSBD), seven stories high with seven sets of windows per floor on the Elm Street side, giving 42 separate positions to fire a weapon from, if one counts the second through seventh floors. Also, there was an enormous Hertz billboard on the roof of the depository that could break up the outline of a person, so they would not be silhouetted from below. A gunman could make a shot from the roof, step behind the billboard and be screened from Elm Street. Further helping a rooftop sniper was the low safety wall surrounding the roof perimeter. A sniper could crouch down behind the wall and take aim with nothing but the barrel of their rifle and the top of their head exposed.

The Dal-Tex Building is of equal height to the depository with three sets of windows per floor for a total of eighteen windows from the second to seventh floor on the Houston Street side of the building. Also, in front of the windows on the Houston Street side was a series of fire escape stairs. These stairs could provide an excellent perch for a sniper (although they would be exposed) or the stairs could provide effective visual screening for a sniper firing from a window, with the stairs obstructing the view of anyone looking in.

The Dallas County Records building, at seven stories tall, also provides an excellent view of the presidential motorcade, and has a score of windows facing the Houston-Elm Street intersection. A sniper could be positioned on the roof or at anyone one of the western windows overlooking Dealey Plaza and have an excellent, unobstructed view of their target.

However, some of the best firing positions are not located in buildings at all, but at the two grassy knolls located at the northern and southern ends of the triple underpass. The northern grassy knoll offers the best location because it is an elevated position with a fence and foliage providing effective cover and concealment for a sniper. More importantly, the motorcade would drive almost directly at the northern knoll, allowing a shooter to make a head-on shot, as if the target in the vehicle was not even moving. The shooter at the southern grassy knoll would have an equally good vantage point, with excellent screening. Importantly, because this southern point is further away than the northern one, people would not expect a shot from there.

Numerous alternate positions were available for back-up shooters. Anywhere a car, van, or pick-up truck could be parked alongside Dealey Plaza, another potential sniper could be positioned. In these cases, a shooter could fire from inside a vehicle, underneath the vehicle, or simply behind the vehicle, using it for visual screening. In fact, vehicles parked alongside Commerce Street to the South of Dealey Plaza provided excellent sniper positions for back-up shooters. The variety of suitable positions meant separate sniper teams could hit a moving target from a variety of locations, from almost any direction. The elevated stature of the surrounding buildings would allow snipers to shoot down, over the surrounding populace. Less elevated positions, like from the two knolls and the second floor of various buildings, would allow someone to get a shot at a target in a vehicle moving either directly away from them or towards them, giving them a constant sight picture as if the target was stationary.


The Northern Grassy Knoll
The killing head shot was made from the northern grassy knoll by a shooter firing from behind this picket fence.

The Plan

After the assassins walked the actual kill zone and thoroughly studied the terrain, a plan was developed. In this plan, redundancy was emphasized. First, numerous sniper teams would be established in a circular pattern around the kill zone so regardless of the spectators lining the way, several of the teams would always have a clear shot. A central kill zone enabled the snipers to take simultaneous shots and expect to hit their target. As the motorcade progressed down its route, some teams would have shots and others would not. However, it was intended at some time during the period the motorcade traveled through kill zone, every shooter would have a chance for a viable shot.

In order to make identification of the target easier in the crowded confines of the Plaza, different vehicle colors would be used. So, when motorcade organizers picked up the rental vehicles before the event, none of the rental vehicles were the same color as the President's limousine.

As mentioned before, some shooters would be in elevated positions. This was a critical component of the overall plan because an elevated position was necessary to secure a bird's eye view of the President. This top-down position enabled an elevated shooter to fire over obstacles near the President like spectators, secret service men, and would help avoid shooting through the body of the limousine or accidentally hitting a passenger like the President's wife.

Each sniper team would have at least one shooter and one radio man to receive and relay commands. The non-shooter would pick up any incriminating shell casings ejected to hide their presence.

When given the command, the sniper teams would fire in unison so the sounds of each other's shots would be masked. This meant several shots fired together would only sound like one. Also, suppressed rifles would be fired along with non-suppressed ones so the regular gunshots would mask the noise of the suppressed ones, thus concealing the total number of shots fired. The snipers firing from the west and south side of the plaza (which was in front of the President) would have suppressors to conceal the fact some shots would be fired from the front. The overall layout of the plaza helped to mask the gunshots, because the buildings caused echoes, confusing spectators as to the real source of the gunfire.

The shooters would only fire as many volleys as required to ensure the president was dead. Unnecessary shots were not desired because of the three shot limit already planned in the incrimination of Oswald. Specifically:

- A sniper team would be placed in the second floor of the Dal-Tex Building.
- A sniper team would be placed on the roof of the TSBD.
- A sniper team would be placed on the sixth floor of the TSBD.
- A sniper team would be placed on the roof of the County Records building.
- A sniper team would be placed on the northern grassy knoll.
- A sniper team would be placed on the southern grassy knoll.

- A sniper team would be placed behind the pergola, between the TSBD and the northern grassy knoll.
- A back-up sniper team would be placed in a pick-up truck on Commerce Street.
- A two-man signal team, one with a radio and one with an umbrella, would signal some of the shooters as a back-up.
- Another person would signal other shooters by waiving a handkerchief.
- Jim Hicks, would be assigned as the radio man to coordinate the overall assassination.
- A mobile command and control vehicle would be stationed at the scene.
- At each sniper position there would be two or three plainclothes security personnel responsible for keeping unwanted spectators away from the snipers preparing for their shots. After the shooting, these same security personnel would sweep the immediate crowd and confiscate any cameras with incriminating evidence.

The snipers had a difficult task because of the other people in the car resulting in collateral damage.

- Most personnel would either dress like police officers (perhaps because some really were officers) or carry official government credentials from either the secret service, the FBI, or the CIA.
- Personnel not involved in the actual shooting, security, or evidence confiscation would dress and act like spectators and maintain a plausible, consistent cover story explaining their presence at the plaza.
- Personnel not involved in planting or confiscating evidence would immediately leave the area in the confusion.
- Lee Harvey Oswald would be the fall guy.
- A Mannlicher-Carcano 6.5 mm rifle would be left behind as evidence.
- Three shell casings would be left behind on the 6th floor of the TSBD.
- At least twenty-five people would be required to execute the actual operation.

This was a complicated plan with many moving parts. Half a dozen sniper teams had to scout and secure their positions, undetected by the public, and be in position at the time of the arrival of the President's motorcade. A lot of potential evidence would have to be covered up and there was a lot of room for miscommunication and other unforeseen problems. Because the different elements of the operation were compartmentalized to some degree, no group rehearsal could be conducted. And without rehearsals, mistakes would be made.

Setting Up in Dealy Plaza

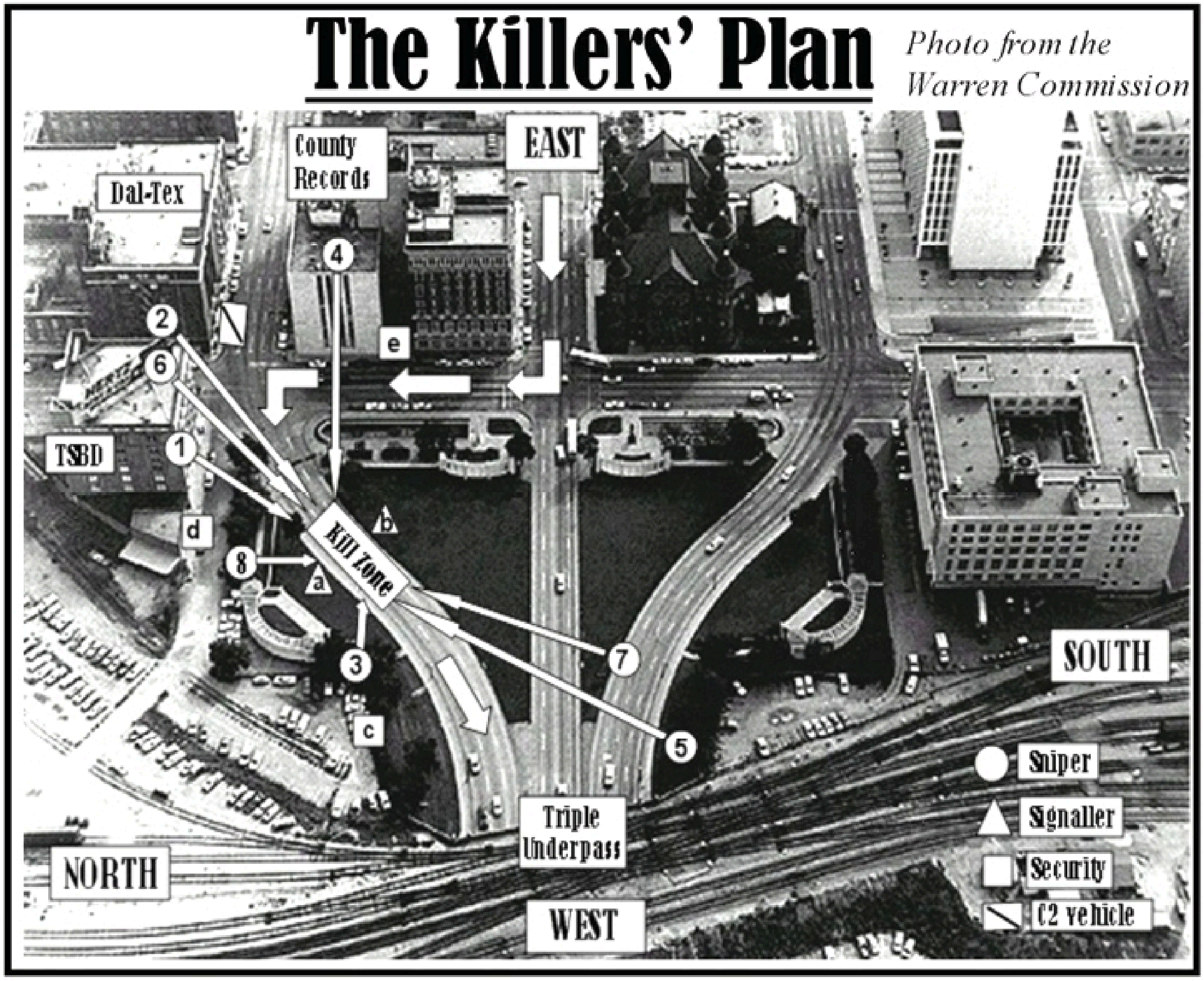
All the players in the operation were in position approximately 10-15 minutes prior to the arrival of the President's motorcade. They arrived as close to the actual execution time as possible in order to minimize their exposure to the populace and legitimate security personnel. Their key to infiltrating was simply masquerading as law-enforcement officers and flashing credentials from various government agencies. This deception worked surprisingly well.

In fact, dozens of eyewitnesses saw the multiple sniper teams setting up in their positions, but they wrote these men off as counter-sniper teams as opposed to being assassins. For example, rail yard employee Lee Bowers saw the snipers on the northern grassy knoll get in their positions ten minutes prior to the hit (Mr. Bowers died in a car accident three years later in 1966 - many believe he was murdered). Several witnesses saw the two separate snipers (neither of whom were Oswald) waiting in the upper floors of the depository, well before the motorcade arrived. All these witnesses later stated they assumed these riflemen were secret service agents.

The conspirators helped the snipers infiltrate Dealey Plaza by staging a medical emergency at the corner of Elm and Houston Street. At approximately 12:19 p.m., eleven minutes before the Presidential motorcade was scheduled to arrive, a man suffered an apparent "seizure", drawing the attention of bystanders in the immediate area. This drawing of attention facilitated the deployment of the various cogs of the assassination machine into their appropriate positions. While everyone watched the poor "victim" driven off in a wailing ambulance, the signalers, snipers, and security/evidence suppression teams moved into position, unnoticed by most people. (Note: Nearby Parkland Hospital never recorded the arrival of a seizure victim.)

Into the Kill Zone

As the Presidential motorcade traveled west on Main Street, towards Dealey Plaza, the snipers were probably warned by radio well ahead of time. Jim Hicks’ job as communications coordinator for the operation was to make sure all the shooters had this kind of updated, real-time information on the Presidential motorcade. When the motorcade approached the Main Street-Houston Street intersection and then turned right and north onto Houston Street, most of the shooters could see their target approaching. When the President’s limousine approached the intersection of Houston and Elm Street, the shooters must have been nervous as they took the safeties of their rifles and prepared to receive the order to open fire. Even if an individual sniper already had a good picture of the target, they were to hold their fire until given the go ahead. An operation of this magnitude required discipline.


The Killers' Plan
Photo from the Warren Commission
EAST
County Records
Dal-Tex
TSBD
Kill Zone
SOUTH
NORTH
WEST
Triple Underpass
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
a
b
c
d
e
Sniper
Signaller
Security
C2 vehicle

At 12:30 p.m., the President’s vehicle slowly turned left and west onto Elm Street, cruising past the Texas School Book Depository, the front of which was marked as the kill zone. It rained earlier in the day and it was warm out. The killers must have been William Greer driving the limousine and agent Roy Kellerman sitting next to him. Seated behind Greer was the wife of Texas Governor Connally and on the passenger side, behind Kellerman, was the Governor himself. Sitting in the driver-side back seat was Jackie Kennedy and to her right, sitting behind Governor Connally, was President Kennedy. A total of five people were in the lead vehicle with the President. They all smiled at the gathered crowd as the sun shined brightly from above on a beautiful November afternoon with gusting winds. Mrs. Connally even said, “Mr. President, you can’t say Dallas doesn’t love you.”

Conspicuously absent from the President’s vehicle were any secret service agents. Agents were standing up, lining the sides of the following vehicle, but not the President’s. This absence of secret service agents allowed the carefully positioned snipers to get a clear view of their target and then take multiple shots free from obstruction by the agents.

As the President’s motorcade approaches the entrance of the kill zone, an unidentified woman walks away from Elm Street and onto the grass of the plaza, near the Elm and Houston Street intersection, waiving a white handkerchief above her head. The command to open fire is given and the first volley is fired. A gunshot is heard from behind the limousine, causing people to look in that direction. A bullet strikes the pavement on Elm Street, near the President’s vehicle. Also, James Tague, standing near the triple underpass, hundreds of feet in front of the motorcade, is hit in the face with a bullet fragment. Of the initial shots fired simultaneously, the shot wounding Tague probably came from the sniper position on the second floor of the Dal-Tex building.

The umbrella man, a signaler, is located on the north side of Elm Street only a few feet from the President. He opens and closes his umbrella several times, signaling to the others the President is still alive.

A second volley is fired moments later. A bullet passes through the front windshield and into the President’s throat. Governor Connally is shot through the chest from the rear, most likely from a rifleman in the depository. A bullet strikes the president in his upper right back. Several other bullets are fired that miss their target altogether. Witnesses are unable to determine exactly how many bullets are fired because of the echoing and some are still unsure where the gunfire originated from.

Agent Greer slows the vehicle, pulls over slightly towards the left south side of Elm Street, and halts the vehicle, making the President a stationary target. Another volley of fire erupts, with a shot made from the northern grassy knoll hitting the President in the front right side of his head. The bullet explodes on impact, spraying brain matter, blood, and bits of skull backwards, towards the rear of the car. Only now, after the President has received a fatal head wound, does agent Greer decide to speed up and drive out of the kill zone.

A Detailed Look at the Assassins' Plan

Now that we understand something of the preparation and execution of the overall assassination, let us look more in depth at the individual mechanisms of the larger killing machine. A closer look reveals a plan executed by men and women skilled in deception, weapons concealment, and the use of cover stories. The sniper positions themselves were well chosen – a work of professionals with specific training. Some of the snipers probably did this kind of work before. (Note: see the picture entitled 'The Killer's Plan' to match up the following positions with the actual locations at Dealey Plaza.)

Sniper position #1, TSBD: There was a 3-4 man team in the TSBD on the sixth floor. Numerous eyewitnesses observed three different men, two of them holding rifles, but the witnesses assumed the gunmen were secret service agents. There is no question there were armed snipers in the TSBD, it is just a matter of determining their identities. The weapons fired from the TSBD did not have suppressors in order to later incriminate Oswald and prove the shots came from the TSBD. According to all the evidence, none of the several shots fired from the TSBD ever hit the President. This was because the TSBD was such a poor position. The trees at times blocked a sniper's view of the President and their target moved laterally across their field of view, from left to right, making a shot difficult. These snipers most likely hit Texas Governor John Connally, missing their intended target by several feet. The TSBD snipers most likely hit the Stemmons Freeway sign and also fired a round that ricocheted off of the sidewalk, adjacent to the TSBD. Overall, their poor shooting increased the number of incriminating bullets found later without even hitting their target.

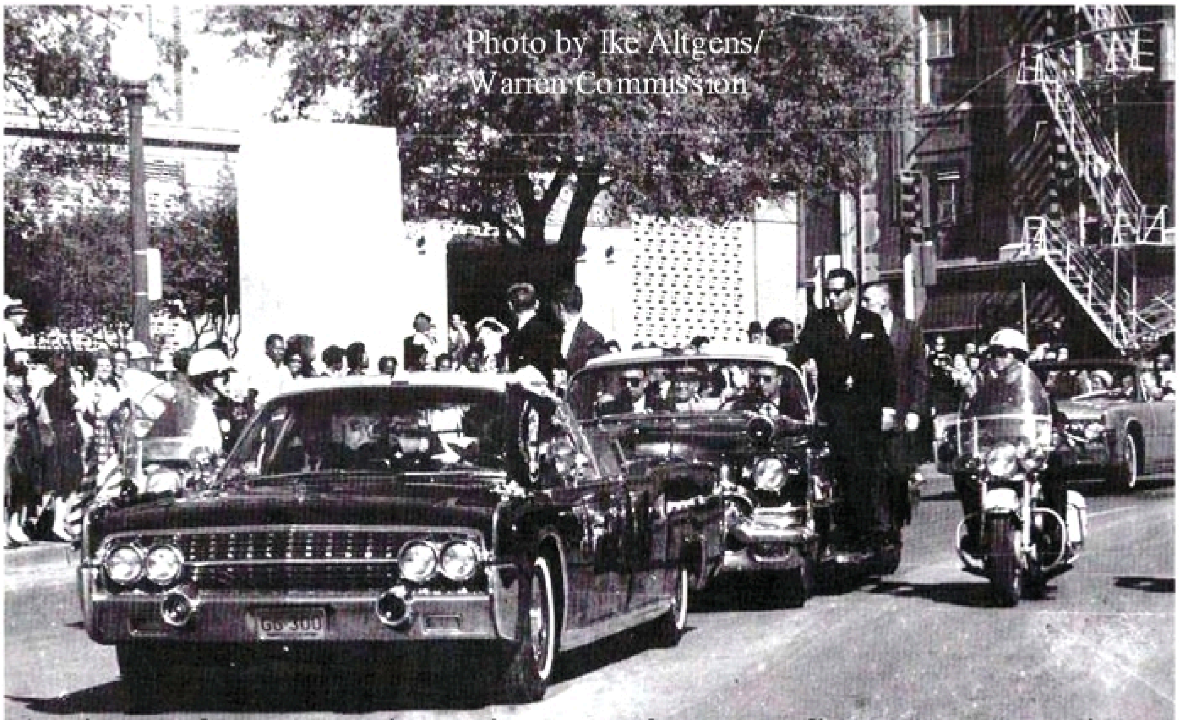


Photo by Ike Altgens/ Warren Commission

A view of the President's car after the first shot had just been fired, which is believed to have come from the open window by the fire escape stairs in the background.

Author Claudia Furiati in her book *ZR Rifle* interviewed a Cuban intelligence officer who identified the two TSBD shooters as being most likely Yito del Valle and Herminio Diaz, who were both Cubans with bald patches on their heads. Several eyewitnesses observed two men with rifles in the TSBD before the shooting who matched the physical description of these two Cubans. Conveniently, Herminio soon died in Cuba, shot by Cuban forces while on a suspected assassination attempt of Castro. Yito was murdered in 1967.

Because the team was already in the TSBD, they should have planted Oswald's rifle and the three shell casings. However, this team was not assigned roles in the post-shooting process, although in an ideal position to do so. Perhaps due to the compartmentalized nature of the operation, the evidence team was kept separate from these shooters. Whatever the reason, gross errors were made concerning the rifle used, the shell casings left behind, and even contradictory photos of Oswald’s sniper position, where different pictures showed different arrangements of boxes.

Sniper position #2, Dal-Tex: There was a sniper team on the second floor of the Dal-Tex building. The shooter fired from a darkened broom closet window with a metal fire-escape stairs in front of the window, helping to visually screen their position. This position offered the shooter excellent cover and concealment and if they used a suppressor, no one would see them pulling the trigger. This slightly elevated position allowed the shooter to fire at the President as the limousine drove away, which is a relatively easy shot when compared to the challenge the firers had in the TSBD. However, since this position was only elevated 10-12 feet, the firer had a difficult time clearing the second follow-on vehicle and its accompanying secret service men. Because of this, they most likely missed several of their shots, hitting the curb near the triple underpass that wounded Tague and lodging a bullet into the windshield frame of the presidential limousine. Overall, this sniper did a poor job of shooting and most likely never hit the President.

Sniper position #3, Northern Grassy Knoll: The northern grassy knoll position, with its trees, picket fence, and concrete retaining wall, offered the two shooters who fired from here excellent cover and concealment from the front. This elevated position also allowed a direct shot into the presidential limousine. While this position offered good concealment from the front, it was exposed to the rear and several eyewitnesses saw a man in a police uniform fire a rifle and another shooter dressed in civilian clothes. One man was observed, after the shooting, throwing his weapon to a “rail yard worker” who broke the rifle down, placing it in a toolbox.

Some investigators believe Corsican contract killer Lucien Sarti pulled the trigger that inflicted the fatal head wound on the President. French heroin trafficker Christian David told a reporter Sarti admitted shooting the President. David also said Sarti, when working overseas, liked to wear a military or police uniform and he used explosive bullets. Seeing as how the President died from a head shot with an exploding bullet by a man in a police uniform, the connection to Sarti is established.

Other researches, including author Craig Roberts, have suggested Roscoe White was the second shooter at the northern grassy knoll position. White was on the Dallas Police Department at the time. White's own son was later to say his father admitted he was one of the shooters on the northern grassy knoll.

The President is Dead

Ike Altgens/Library of Congress

The limousine drives away, towards the triple underpass, as Jacqueline Kennedy climbs away from her bloodied husband.

Sniper position #4, Dallas County Records: This position had a top-down view of the target, seven stories high, and offered the best overall view of Dealey Plaza and the kill zone. A small parapet encircles the roof's perimeter, offering visual screening from people below. Without a doubt, there was a sniper on the roof of the Dallas County Records building. We know this because Sheriff James Decker ordered police sniper Harry Weatherford onto the roof as a counter-sniper before the motorcade arrived. Interestingly enough, three weeks before the President's motorcade drove through Dealey Plaza, Weatherford ordered a custom-built sound suppressor for a rifle. Additionally, a missed shot near a manhole cover on the south side of Elm Street lined up exactly with the Country Records building Weatherford was on.

To reinforce this, in 1976, a worker discovered a .30-06 shell casing lying under some tar paper on the roof of the Country Records building, which is more physical evidence that at least one shot was fired from this location. When a reporter asked Weatherford if he shot the President on November 22, Weatherford did not answer with a "no." Instead, Weatherford said, "You little son of a bitch, I shoot lots of people."

Many investigators believe the shot striking the President in the back was fired from this position.

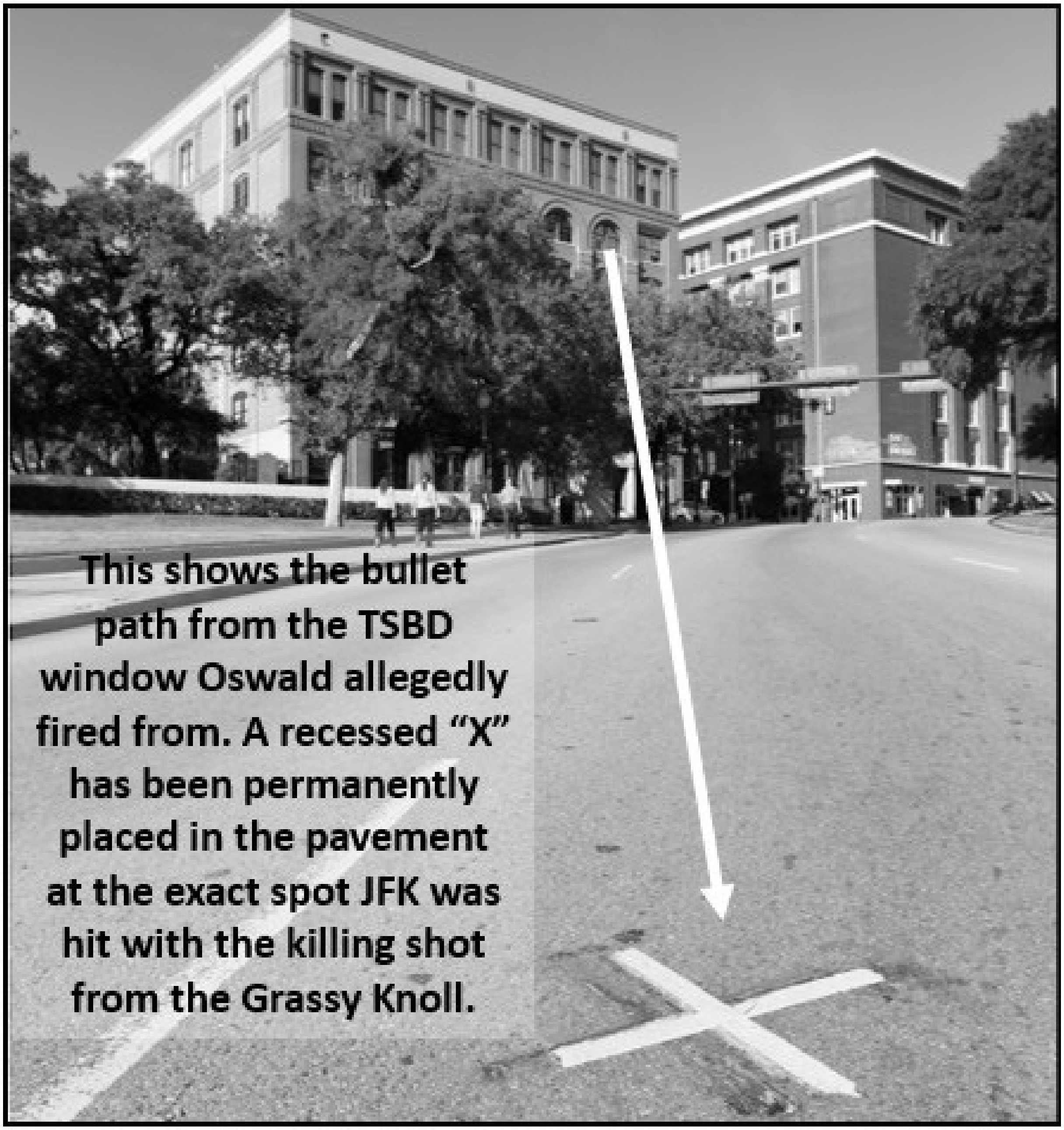
And since the shell found on the roof in 1976 had an unusually crimped neck, like a sabot round, this shell could have been used to fire a 6.5 mm bullet (like the one corresponding to the Mannlicher-Carcano) into the President. This evidence has led investigators to guess Weatherford had a suppressed rifle, firing a sabot round into the President's back to introduce 'evidence' that Oswald shot the President. The sniper from this position also missed a shot, hitting the sidewalk near the manhole cover, just like the other snipers who, all combined, missed more shots than they made.

Sniper position #5, Southern Grassy Knoll: The southern grassy knoll position had all the same attributes of cover and concealment from the front as did the northern one. Many investigators believe the bullet penetrating the front windshield of the limousine, hitting the president in the throat, was fired from here. Many eyewitnesses thought a shot originated from the southern knoll and one person stated they smelled gunpowder in that area after the shootings. A study of the angle from the hole in the windshield to the President's throat leads one to trace the trajectory back to the southern knoll.

Other investigators suggest a shot may have been fired from a storm sewer located near the southern knoll. This would have allowed a shooter to fire from a completely concealed position, invisible to spectators. Of interest, the tunnels from that storm sewer connect to the basement of the Dallas county jail, located in Dealey Plaza, adjacent to the county records building. These tunnels would allow a shooter to make a shot and then move underground and escape undetected. This shot was either an extremely lucky one, or an incredibly skilled one, or a little bit of both. When a bullet hits glass, its initial trajectory becomes altered, causing the bullet to deflect, veering off its intended course. A shooter can minimize this deflection when shooting through glass by using a high-velocity, jacketed bullet that resists fragmentation and has the speed and weight to punch cleanly through the obstacle.

Imagine the shooter on the southern knoll as he made this shot. The sniper was two hundred feet away, sighting in on the President's head as the limousine drove towards him. The shooter had to look through a windshield that distorted the view of the target. The shooter also has to shoot past the two secret service agents sitting in the front seat and shoot between Governor Connally and his wife sitting in front of the President. This was an extremely difficult shot. The sniper probably intended to shoot the President in the head, but the glass deflected his shot down eight inches, making the bullet strike off target into the President's throat, which was a non-fatal shot.

Sniper position #6, Roof TSBD: There may have been a team on the roof of the TSBD, but this has never been confirmed. However, one police officer stated when he heard the first shot and looked towards the TSBD, he saw pigeons flying away from the roof. Also, several investigators reported that a rifle was initially found on the roof of the TSBD; this report was subsequently changed. After examining the problems the conspirators had concealing all the rifles they left behind, this extra weapon becomes part of a pattern. Another advantage of a roof shot from here is the increased elevation would help a shooter clear the trees below.


This shows the bullet path from the TSBD window Oswald allegedly fired from. A recessed “X” has been permanently placed in the pavement at the exact spot JFK was hit with the killing shot from the Grassy Knoll.

Sniper position #7, Pick-Up Truck on Commerce Street: There is no confirmation a sniper was established at this position, but there are several things to consider. First, in a picture taken by Frank Cancellare of Life magazine, a pick-up truck is clearly seen parked on the left-hand (north) shoulder of Commerce Street. In the back of this pick-up truck there is man seated in the bed, with his left arm reaching down, grasping an object that cannot be seen. The man, despite the numerous shots fired, remains sitting in the truck facing the motorcade. This truck would have made a good urban sniper hide because the shooter could raise their weapon, fire a shot, and then quickly lower the rifle again.

The reader should also consider that after the Abraham Zapruder film (which recorded the entire assassination) was tampered with, the picture of this man in the bed of the pick-up truck was altered. In the tampered film, the man was erased and a flatbed cover was inserted into the picture, covering up the back of the truck. If this man was not a back-up sniper, then why was he erased from the tampered film? Other tampered film also blacked out the shooter on the northern grassy knoll, hiding a man numerous eyewitnesses saw. Since the conspirators erased the sniper on the grassy knoll, it makes sense they also erased the back-up sniper in the pick-up truck on Commerce Street.

Sniper Position 8, Pergola: Incarcerated criminal James Files stated he was one of the shooters in the northern grassy knoll area. He stated after he fired his round he bit into the shell casing, leaving indentations of his teeth as a personal “signature” of his actions. Years after the assassination, John Rademacher found two .222 caliber shell casings, one behind the grassy knoll and another closer to the TSBD behind the pergola. The one on the grassy knoll had human teeth marks in the shell casings, corroborating Files’ story.

Also, eyewitness Malcom Summers stated immediately after the shooting, he encountered a man adjacent to the pergola with a jacket over his arm, holding a weapon. This unidentified man told Summers he would be shot if he went any further towards the pergola. Summers later identified the man’s weapon as a Remington XP-100 Fireball. The XP-100 is an ideal urban sniper weapon as it fires a .222 caliber rifle round, is extremely accurate, powerful, and concealable. Additionally, other witnesses stated at least one shot was fired from besides the President, which corroborates a sniper at the pergola position.

Signaler a: There appeared to be two separate signalers, standing side by side, on the north side of Elm Street as the presidential motorcade approached. The most infamous of these signalers was the “Umbrella Man”, a man who was dressed in a dark jacket holding an umbrella. After the President weathered the first volley of fire, this man raised his umbrella high and opened and closed it several times. Why this man had an umbrella out when it was warm and sunny is the first give away. Then opening and closing the umbrella while under fire is inexplicable, unless he was there to signal a shooter. (Author's note: Many investigators believe this umbrella was a modified device capable of firing a poison dart - in other words it was a concealment device for an assassination weapon. The reader should research this claim on their own as there is considerable public material on it.)

A second man was standing in front of Umbrella Man, wearing a long-sleeve white shirt, and was seen raising his hand high, looking past the motorcade and across Dealey Plaza as if signaling to someone. This man's white shirt is easily seen from a distance and would be the color of choice if one had to give someone a visual signal. Both of these men showed no reaction to the multiple shots fired and were later seen sitting down next to each other on the grass after the assassination. Both then walked off.

Signaler b: As puzzling as these two men was the woman observed on the south side of Elm Street, located closer to the intersection of Elm and Houston Streets. As the President's limousine approached the front of the depository (i.e. the kill zone) she pulled out a white handkerchief and waved it high in the air. Why she did this other than to signal the entrance of the limousine into the kill zone is unknown, but her actions did not fit in.

It is possible redundant signalers were established just as redundant sniper teams were put in place. These signalers were used as visual back-ups in case there was a problem with the radio communications. While the props the signalers used (an umbrella, a handkerchief, and a man in a white shirt with an outstretched arm) all fit into the urban environment, it was their actions and body language exposing them. There is nothing unusual about an umbrella unless you have it on a sunny afternoon and then open and closed it vigorously several times while the President of the United States got his head blown off several feet from you. A handkerchief in itself is nothing to be concerned with unless you wave it over your head several times just before the President is riddled with bullets. While their props fit in, their actions did not.

Jim Hicks, who was caught on film walking towards the northern grassy knoll after the shooting with what appeared to be a radio in his back pocket, later admitted to New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison he was the radio coordinator for the assassination (Jim Garrison was subsequently admitted to an insane asylum and then murdered after his release). Analysis of other photographs revealed more “civilians” caught talking into radios at the time of the killing. There is no question there was a system of communications established and it makes sense there would be redundant measures in this system.

Command and Control: Also of note, a white laundry van with a large silver trailer van parked behind it was positioned conspicuously on Houston Street, adjacent to the Dal-Tex building and facing the Elm and Houston Street intersection. The laundry van had an excellent view of the adjacent intersection and the entire kill zone. While no one knows the true purpose of these vehicles, they do appear out of place. However, either one would have served very well as an on-the-scene, command and control vehicle. Personnel could have been hidden in the back of either vehicle, passing reports, giving commands, and reporting on events as they unfolded, unseen by the bystanders around them. Why either vehicle was allowed to be parked so close to the Presidential route is unknown. However, this is just one more piece in an overall pattern of relaxed security allowing the conspirators to position themselves anywhere they wanted to prior to and after the assassination. Researchers have found that in the post-shooting tampered film the silver trailer was removed.

Security c: A two or three man security team worked this position by the northern grassy knoll, keeping random bystanders away by flashing government badges. After the shooting, a man dressed in a police uniform, with dirty hands, confiscated a video-camera at gunpoint from eyewitness Gordon Arnold so this evidence could not be viewed at a later date. Numerous eyewitnesses reported seeing several men on the northern grassy knoll who left immediately after the shooting.

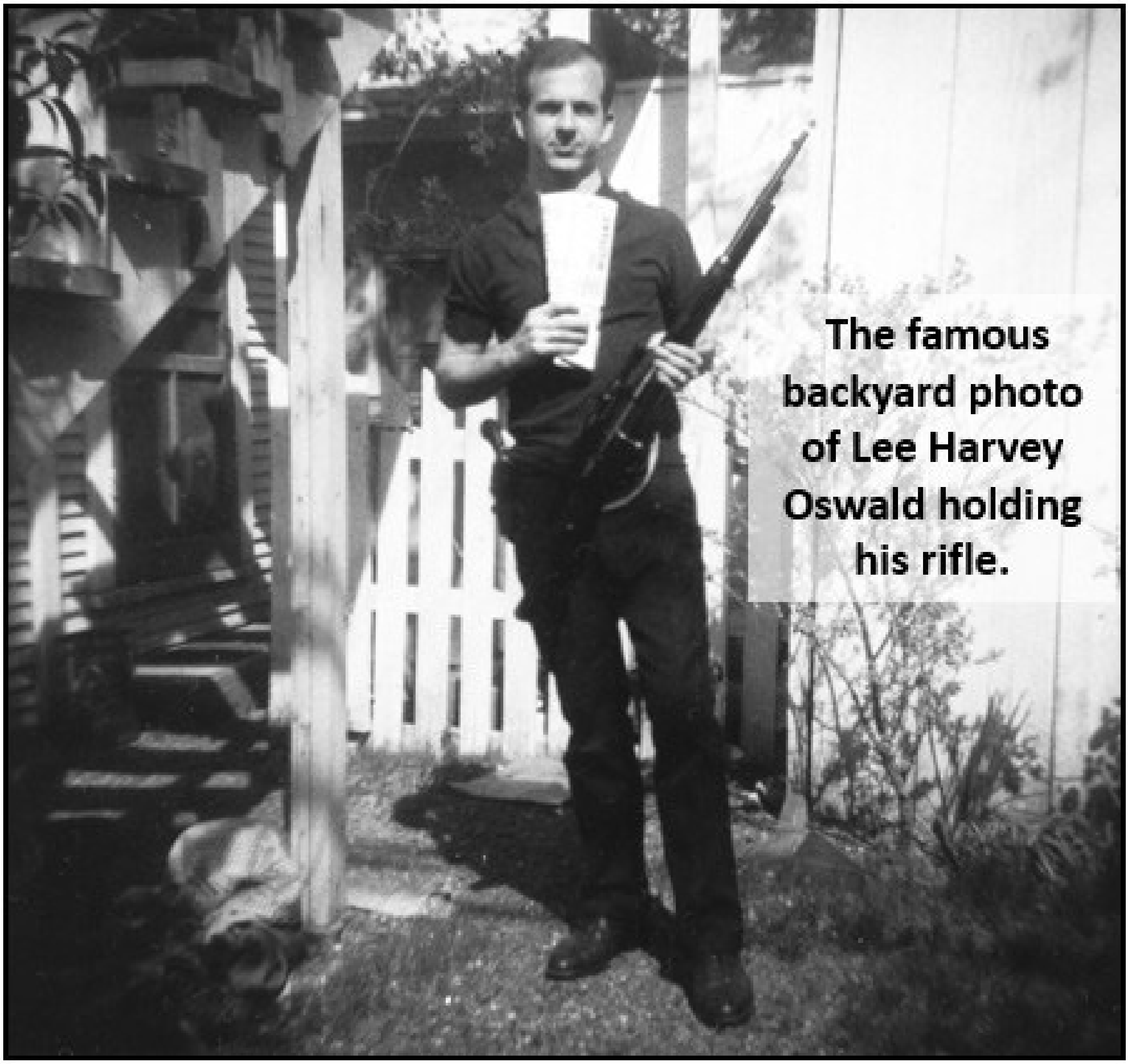
Security d: Eyewitness met several men near the TSBD who were armed and stated they were with the secret service. The secret service said they never placed any agents in the area before or after the shooting.

Security e: Several suspicious men were "arrested" in this area and were either released or never reported as being detained.

The Rifle Problem

The assassins had a problem with their rifles. Several rifles were discovered and publicly reported as opposed to the single Mannlicher-Carcano 6.5 mm rifle supposed to be left behind by Oswald. A closer look may reveal why these problems occurred.

1st Weapon: Mannlicher-Carcano 6.5 mm rifle. This was the weapon that was eventually "found" on the 6th floor of the depository, hidden under some boxes on the far side of the building, away from the alleged "sniper nest", and reportedly stashed there by Lee Harvey Oswald. However, this rifle was initially reported as being found on the fourth floor and specifically not on the same floor as the three spent shell casings. Many researchers believe the rifle found was not the rifle shown in the infamous backyard photo (which many researchers agree is a poorly doctored image), nor the rifle shown as evidence during the subsequent Warren Commission proceedings. There were no fingerprints initially found on the rifle after dusting for them, until several days later, when Oswald's palm print was reportedly found on the rifle under the stock. When Oswald was given a paraffin test to see if there was gunshot residue on his body, the test came back positive for his hands (which could have been caused by handling paint during the day), but negative for his face. A person firing a rifle would have their head and face covered in a cloud of residue as well.



The famous backyard photo of Lee Harvey Oswald holding his rifle.

2nd Weapon: Mauser 7.92 mm rifle. Initially, the first rifle discovered in the TSBD and reported to the media by the Dallas police was a bolt-action 7.92 mm Mauser rifle with no scope. The officer who found the rifle even read to reporters the name of the weapon stamped into the receiver of the rifle letter by letter… M-A-U-S-E-R.

Authorities later said they mistook the Mauser rifle with no scope for the Mannlicher- Carcano rifle with a scope.

3rd Weapon: Lee-Enfield .303 rifle. Several witnesses recounted police officers finding a rifle on the roof of the TSBD. In fact, police officers were captured on film by the Dallas Cinema Associates standing on the east-side fire escape of the TSBD holding up this weapon.

Those who saw the rifle stated it looked like a Lee-Enfield rifle, not a Mannlicher-Carcano.

4th Weapon: Johnson semi-automatic .30-06 rifle. Another rifle reportedly found by police was a .30-06 rifle used previously in U.S. government sponsored anti-Castro operations in Cuba.

Further supporting this report was the fact a .30-06 rifle casing was found on the roof of the Country Records Building in 1976.

Why the assassins had such a difficult time planting the appropriate weapon in the right location is a mystery. It is likely one of the shooters in the TSBD, who used a Mauser rifle, left it behind by mistake. The plan may have been for the plant team to be in the TSBD before the police arrived on the scene, allowing them to plant the Mannlicher-Carcano and remove the Mauser. Since the shooters in the TSBD left without their weapons, they had to stash them somewhere. Due to poor planning on the conspirators' part, they did not get into the TSBD in time to make the switch. Consequently, when the plant team arrived late, they belatedly planted the Mannlicher-Carcano and had to deal with the now-embarrassing Mauser, which had to be covered up.

A similar pattern seems apparent with the other rifles. The snipers most likely left them behind after the shooting so they could escape the immediate area undetected. The plan was for follow on teams to secure these rifles discretely and spirit them away unknown to the general public. However, since there were so many people in the area after the shooting, various people saw the rifles. If the shooters concealed the rifles at their sniper positions (and recovered them later) or concealed them as they left, these embarrassing incidents would have been avoided. Instead, there were several rifle sightings to cover up.

A copy of the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle on display in front if the “sniper’s nest” at the TSBD museum.

The Bullet Problem

While the conspirators failed to make it look like a single weapon was found and was in fact fired by Oswald, this part of their deception plan went better than the efforts to conceal the actual number of shots fired. Since the conspirators planted only three shell casings in the depository, they were forced to explain the entire shooting with just three bullets. But, more than just an errant bullet or two had to be explained, they had to cover up evidence revealing a dozen or more shots fired but not planned for.

#1 Bullet: One of the first shots fired missed the target, striking the pavement on Elm Street near the President’s limousine, seen by numerous eyewitnesses. This bullet distracted many people in the motorcade, causing them to look back, over their shoulders, for the source of the shot. This first missed shot drew most peoples’ attention away from a subsequent frontal shot striking the President in the throat. This first shot may have been fired from one of the shooters in the TSBD and it is a mystery as how a shooter could have missed the target by such a wide margin. It may simply be because the President’s limousine was a moving target and thus very difficult to hit on the first try.

#2 Bullet: Another early shot fired from the west/front of the Presidential limousine and went through the front windshield, hitting the President in the throat. Since the entry wound was relatively small, a smaller bullet of a .222 caliber size may have been used. The supposed windshield itself was provided to the Warren Commission as evidence but witnesses say it was a fake, because it now had a crack in it as opposed to the original bullet hole. Some investigators believe the position of the original bullet hole, on the left hand side of the windshield, indicates a shot that could have only come from the southern grassy knoll, not the northern one.

#3 Bullet: Another early shot missing the President and hitting a curb near the triple underpass, wounding bystander James Tague in the cheek with a fragment. The actual piece of curb was cut up and removed as evidence. This evidence has been accepted universally as proof of one of the bullets fired that missed the President. This shot was most likely fired from the Dal-Tex building sniper position.

#4 Bullet: The bullet hitting the President in his upper right back. Investigators theorize a shooter positioned behind the President on the roof of the Dallas County Records building made this shot. These same investigators say, due to the angle of the shot striking the President in the back, the bullet could not have possibly come out through the center of his throat as an exit wound.

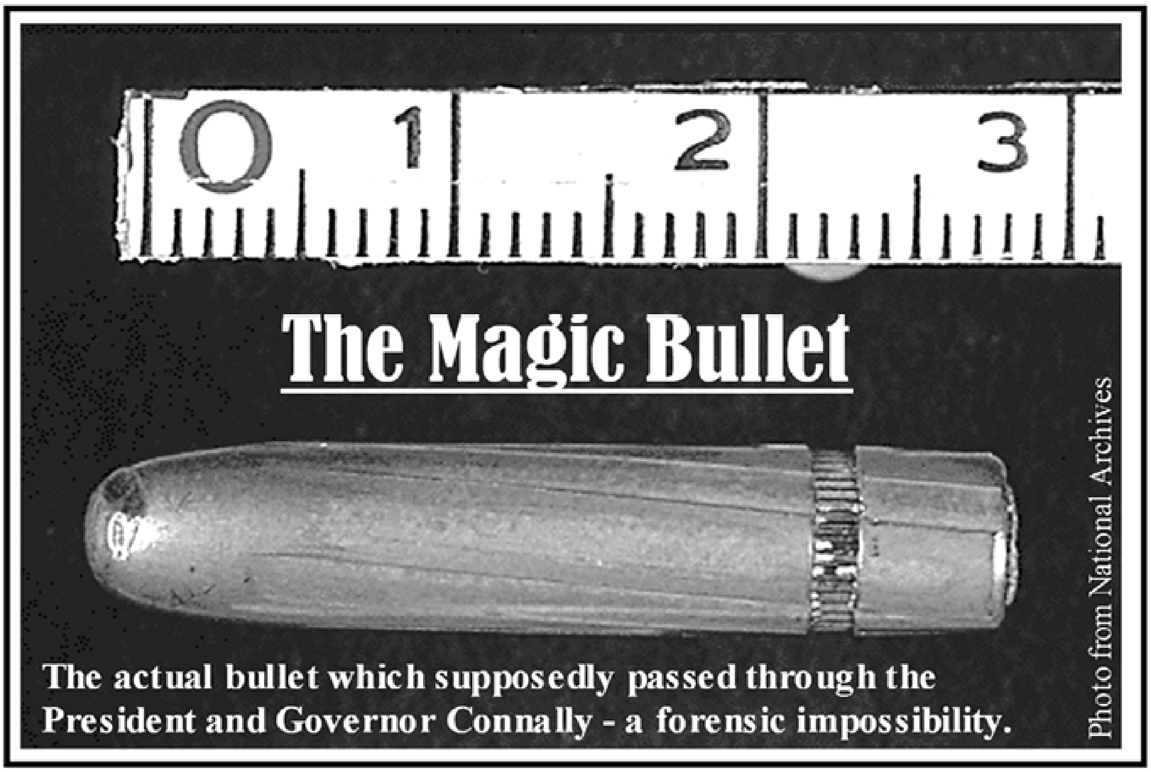
#5 Bullet: Another near miss lodging into the top inside windshield frame of the Presidential limousine. This was most likely another shot fired from the Dal-Tex building due to the relatively flat angle of trajectory.

#6 Bullet: This is the bullet striking Texas Governor Connally in the chest. One should note that a bullet hitting flesh, muscle, and bone, like a bullet hitting Governor Connally, would show visible signs of deformation. Even a bullet with a full-metal jacket would deform on impact, unlike the “magic” bullet found later.

#7 Bullet: This is the bullet hitting Texas Governor Connally in the wrist. Again, any bullet that hit flesh, muscle, and bone like this would have deformed upon impact.

#8 Bullet: There is some evidence to indicate the wound to Texas Governor Connally’s left thigh was from a separate bullet. And regardless if the bullet was a separate shot or not, again, it would show definite signs of deformation after striking a large muscle like the thigh.

#9 Bullet: The bullet striking the President in the front, right side of his head. Some investigators believe a second bullet hit the President in the back of the head, almost simultaneously as the front shot, but since the conspirators "lost" the President's brain during the subsequent autopsy, we will never know until the brain is "found." The known right, front head shot was from a frangible (or exploding) bullet. This type of fragmenting bullet is hard to identify in a post-shooting forensic investigation because the remaining fragments are so small and damaged they do not retain enough of the rifling marks from the gun's barrel, meaning they cannot be matched with the rifle they were fired from.



The actual bullet which supposedly passed through the President and Governor Connally - a forensic impossibility.

Photo from National Archives

#10 Bullet: A missed shot hitting the Stemmons Freeway sign, causing the conspirators to remove this sign and replace it with a new and noticeably larger one after the assassination.

#11 Bullet: Another miss ricocheting off the sidewalk running along the TSBD, later altered to look like it was an old, weathered mark. This shot is generally believed to have been fired from a western window from the TSBD.

#12 Bullet: Another miss bouncing off of the concrete near a manhole cover next to Elm Street. Near this location were two furrows in the grass, which a police officer on the scene said looked like marks made from bullets. The woman who initially pointed out these furrows noted they led back to the northern grassy knoll.

#13 Bullet: A spent bullet later found in the grass of Dealey Plaza by a witness and then picked up by an unknown person assumed to be a government officer. The bullet and the “officer” were never seen again.

#14 Bullet: In 1966, a bullet was extracted from a building located 1/4 mile from and in line with the TSBD and was determined by the FBI to be a Full Metal Jacket .30 caliber M-1 carbine bullet. In other words, it was not fired from Oswald’s supposed rifle and must have been fired by another shooter with a different weapon.

#15 Bullet: In 1967, another bullet was found on top of a building located eight blocks from the TSBD. This bullet was a jacketed .30 caliber soft-point, weighing 149 grains and was not from Lee Harvey Oswald’s gun. Again, another shooter with a different weapon must have fired this bullet.

#16 Bullet: In 1974, a bullet fragment was found in Dealey Plaza, 500 yards from the TSBD. The FBI reported it was from a metal jacketed, soft-point, (or hollow point), sporting bullet. It was not fired from Lee Harvey Oswald’s gun. Another shooter with a different weapon must have fired this bullet.

#17 Bullet: There is some evidence the snipers may have accidentally shot one of their own men in the crossfire. Several times after the shooting, a report was issued about a secret service agent who was shot during the assassination. Also, Jerry Coley and Charlie Mulkey, two reporters for the Dallas Morning News, discovered a fresh pool of red blood on some steps leading to Elm Street near the depository. Mulkey actually tasted the red liquid and noted it was blood. Both men returned later with their cameras and took pictures of the pool of blood. Other witnesses also confirmed the presence of blood stains found near the scene of the shooting, either in a similar spot or other areas. It is possible one of the bogus secret service agents was wounded by accident in the crossfire and initial reports of a wounded secret service agent referred to this conspirator.

In addition to this evidence showing more than three shots were allegedly fired that day, most of the eyewitnesses at Dealey Plaza stated anywhere from six to eight shots were heard. Other eyewitnesses to the shooting stated they thought the President was struck with six or more shots. All these bullets indicate the snipers fired several volleys of shots, with different snipers firing during each volley. These bullets also reveal the majority of the shots missed their targets. This is understandable as there is nothing more difficult than trying to shoot a small, moving target, from within a large crowd of people, without being seen. Since there was a mix of different snipers, some were more skilled than others. The skilled shot, fired through the front windshield, in between several people, and hitting the President in the throat, was impressive. In contrast, the shots fired from the TSBD, striking Governor Connally and missing President Kennedy by several feet, reveal a poor shooter who had not practiced hitting a moving target before the assassination.

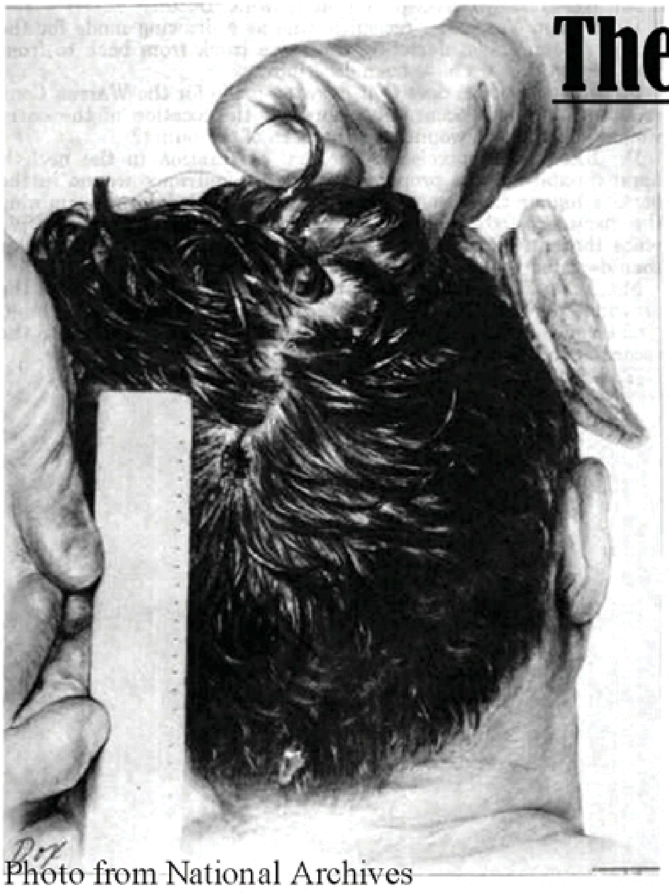


Photo from National Archives

The Head Wound

This is a government artist's rendition of the President's head wound showing that the bullet entered from the rear of the head. Critics say photos were not allowed of the actual wound because it would conclusively show the President was shot from the front - not the rear. This was just another example of manipulation of the forensic evidence that pointed to a concerted cover up of the shooting.

Conclusion

We only briefly touched on different aspects of the autopsy which served to provide many more examples of a deliberate coverup by the authorities involved. This was part of the four areas that needed to be covered up: guns, bullets, wounds, and witnesses. FBI sources stated that the Russian leadership, to include the KGB, believed ultraright elements in the U.S. carried out a carefully planned coup while the actual assassination involved multiple shooters. Also, the KGB believed President Johnson was complicit in the assassination as he did appoint the Warren Commission that synchronized the cover up across multiple agencies. The Russians denied having any official connections with Oswald, refused to let him return to their country, and believed he was actually working for the FBI.

The Dealey Plaza snipers had a difficult job, which ultimately proved impossible. Anyone can kill the President, but killing the President and framing a single person is something entirely different. The assassins did develop an operation which displayed sophisticated, unconventional urban sniping methodology. While they did kill President Kennedy, they failed to cover up the assassination. The most salient reason for this failing was the assassins spent more effort on killing the President than ensuring the forensic and physical evidence meshed with the actual execution. Notably, the assassins failed to match the number of rifles and bullets discovered after the operation with the evidence meant to link Lee Harvey Oswald to the shooting.

National Archives

Jack Ruby shoots Oswald, ensuring the alleged shooter could never refute the evidence against him.

Chapter 14
Terror in Texas

I don't really understand myself these days. I am supposed to be an average reasonable and intelligent young man. However, lately (I can't recall when it started) I have been a victim of many unusual and irrational thoughts.

-Charles Whitman

Terror in Texas

On August 1, 1966, Charles Joseph Whitman gunned down forty-six people from the University of Texas Tower in Austin. In essence, Whitman was a guerrilla sniper. Just as a guerrilla commits a crime against the state by attempting to overthrow the government, a mass murderer also commits a crime. In Whitman's case, he was a mentally ill individual who moved among the sane world, masquerading as a normal person. Whitman's mental camouflage was to act like everyone else: to pay the bills, to come home to his wife, to go to school. If he let his guard down and his true thoughts oozed out, he would no longer be invisible, he would be identified for what he gradually became: a homicidal sociopath.

Whitman's case is instructive for a variety of other tactical reasons such as understanding noise in an urban environment and how people react to it. Whitman's shootings teaches us about the importance of elevation for an urban sniper, the advantage of shooting from a covered position, and what counter-sniper measures a security force may take against a shooter. Perhaps most important of all, the Charles Whitman case shows what a sniper can accomplish when they are unconcerned with saving their own life. When Whitman began his shooting spree, he did not care about surviving the event. His sole desire was to kill as many people as possible until he was killed himself. If Whitman wanted to live, he would have made a shot or two and then fled the scene. At most, a person or two would have their precious lives stolen from them.

Because life ceased to have any meaning for him, Whitman’s sniper attack became a gruesome bloodbath. Taken in this light, Charles Whitman could be described as a sniper-martyr.

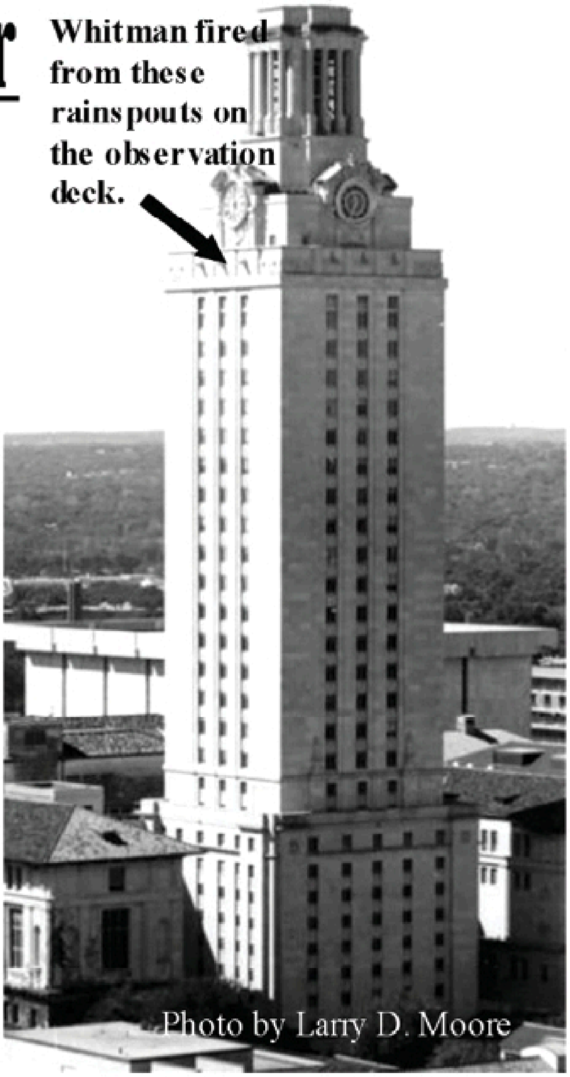
Whitman’s Sniper Training

Whitman’s marksmanship training began at an early age because his father was an avid shooter, indeed a fanatical gun lover. As early as two-years of age, Whitman was seen posing with two of his father’s rifles. By the time Whitman was a teenager, he was an excellent shot. Whitman received additional, professional shooting instruction as a member of the United States Marine Corps where he earned high scores in rapid long-range fire and was best at shooting moving targets. After Whitman left the Marine Corps and attended college in Austin, he regularly fired his personal weapons at local rifle ranges, continually honing his shooting skills.

It is important to note Whitman became a skilled and proficient shooter in a completely legal manner. All over the world it is perfectly legal to play with toy guns, hunt squirrels and have your father take you shooting. It is equally acceptable to join a nations’ military, receive extensive marksmanship training, and then be discharged from military service. In most of the world, it is possible to fire sniper rifles on public firearms ranges without raising an eyebrow from anyone. As long as the shooter maintains an outward appearance of normalcy, they can train as often as they want.

The Texas Tower

The Texas Tower, at 307 feet, provided a dominating view of the surrounding terrain. There was no other structure on the campus that allowed a shooter such an excellent bird's eye view of the university. When Whitman fired from the rain spouts on the observation deck, he was completely hidden from view, invisible to his victims below. Also, people firing back at Whitman had little chance of hitting him because of the extreme angle they had to fire at. Most rounds went harmlessly over his head or bounced ineffectively off the concrete parapet of the observation deck.



Whitman fired from these rainspouts on the observation deck.

Photo by Larry D. Moore

Planning and Reconnaissance

Just as a guerrilla sniper carefully plans for their operations, so did Whitman. Whitman picked the perfect structure to shoot from, the University of Texas at Austin's tower, and then conducted a thorough reconnaissance of it. As early as April of 1966, four months before his killing spree, Whitman was seen by the tower receptionist visiting the tower's observation deck. This did not raise any suspicions because many students visited the observation deck to enjoy the view, to engage in idle chatter, or just to relax. Because Whitman was just one of many students who regularly visited the tower, he fit in and visited the tower whenever he pleased.

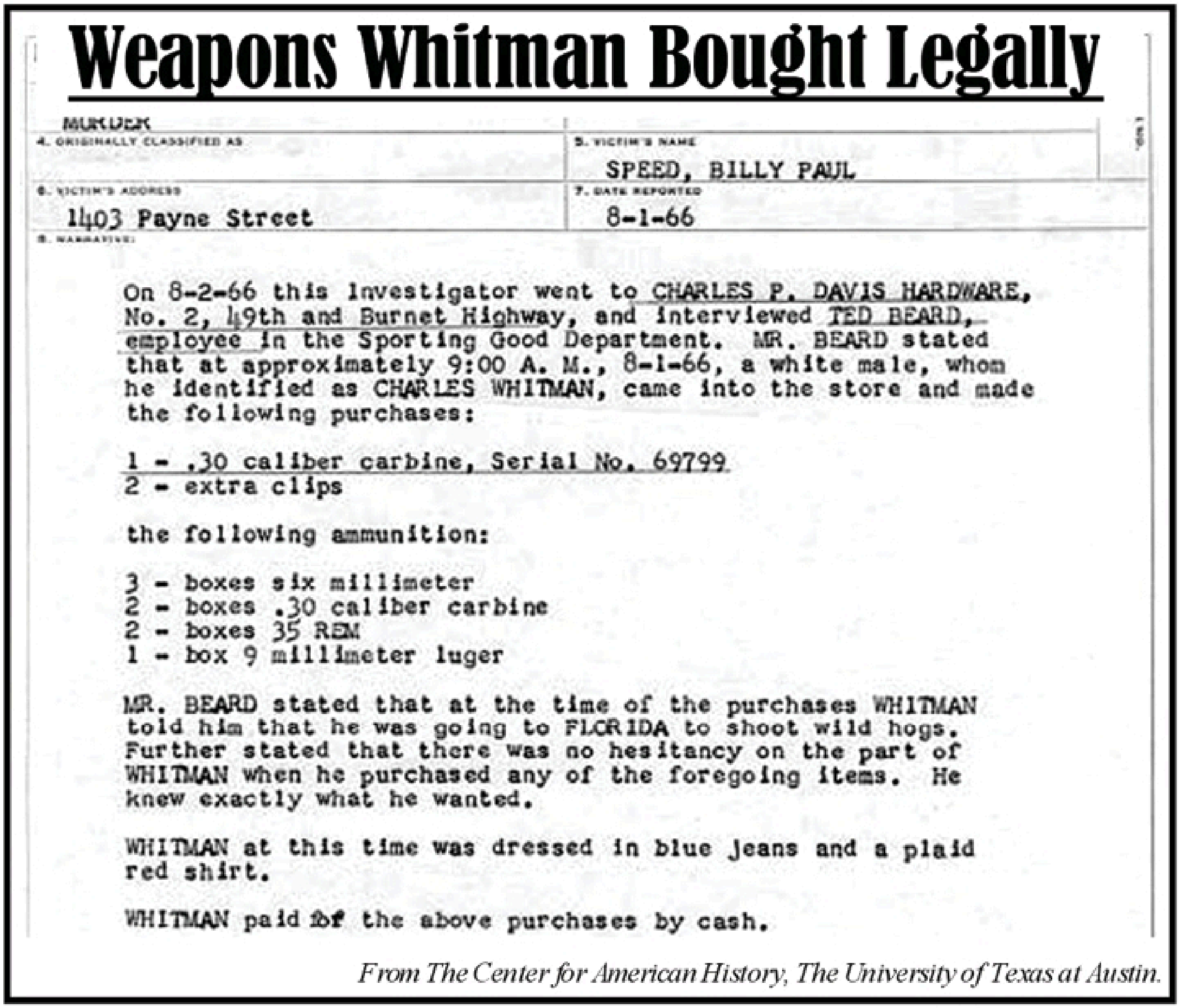
Once he was in the tower mingling with the other campus' students, Whitman analyzed his future sniper platform in detail. He saw he had clear fields of fire in all directions and there were rain spouts on all sides he could shoot from while remaining hidden from view. Whitman also knew the layout of the observation deck, what security measures were in place (there were none), and what route to take to get from the bottom floor of the tower all the way to the 28th floor at the top. Because Whitman was a student enrolled at the University, he had free reign to walk all over campus to observe security measures, student patterns, and the local terrain.

In this manner, Whitman used the same methods a guerrilla sniper uses to scout out a firing platform and the surrounding areas. As long as a guerrilla blends into the local population, has an effective cover story, and has no incriminating evidence on their person (like a weapon) they can go anywhere they please to conduct a reconnaissance for their sniper attacks. Consequently, the guerrilla sniper can plan their attack to the tiniest detail, in an overt manner, without raising any suspicion, just like Whitman did.

Preparation for the Attack

Once Whitman conducted his detailed reconnaissance of his sniper platform and the surrounding area, he equipped himself for the attack. Whitman planned a long siege and assembled a variety of goods to support his killing, packing them into a military-style footlocker. In this footlocker Whitman placed a portable radio, water, food, weapons cleaning gear, a variety of weapons, plenty of ammunition, and earplugs to name a few. In fact, just a day prior to his attack, Whitman purchased a Bowie knife, binoculars, and canned goods. Since these were normal items with a variety of purposes and uses, no one thought anything of it.

On the day of the attack, Whitman bought a rifle, a shotgun, and several hundred rounds of ammunition. Whitman purchased all of these items over the counter from a hardware store, a Sears store, and a local gun shop. Because Whitman had a believable cover story (he said he was going hunting for hogs in Florida), had good credit, and a reliable history of purchasing weapons on lay-a-way plans, he bought everything he needed with ease. Whitman even rented a dolly to transport his heavy footlocker, realizing he could not carry it all by hand. Whitman was ready for a sniping operation that could easily last all day, maybe longer.



Weapons Whitman Bought Legally

MURDER

4. ORIGINALLY CLASSIFIED AS	5. VICTIM'S NAME SPEED, BILLY PAUL
6. VICTIM'S ADDRESS 1403 Payne Street	7. DATE REPORTED 8-1-66

8. NARRATIVE:

On 8-2-66 this Investigator went to CHARLES P. DAVIS HARDWARE, No. 2, 49th and Burnet Highway, and interviewed TED BEARD, employee in the Sporting Good Department. MR. BEARD stated that at approximately 9:00 A. M., 8-1-66, a white male, whom he identified as CHARLES WHITMAN, came into the store and made the following purchases:

1 - .30 caliber carbine, Serial No. 69799
2 - extra clips

the following ammunition:

3 - boxes six millimeter
2 - boxes .30 caliber carbine
2 - boxes 35 REM
1 - box 9 millimeter luger

MR. BEARD stated that at the time of the purchases WHITMAN told him that he was going to FLORIDA to shoot wild hogs. Further stated that there was no hesitancy on the part of WHITMAN when he purchased any of the foregoing items. He knew exactly what he wanted.

WHITMAN at this time was dressed in blue jeans and a plaid red shirt.

WHITMAN paid for the above purchases by cash.

From The Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

The important thing to understand with these purchases is they were all completely legal. Whitman did not break any laws and was well within his rights to have everything he purchased. A guerrilla sniper can obtain weapons and ammunition in the same manner. Wherever it is legal to purchase firearms for sporting use, a guerrilla can get a weapon with ease. Whitman's ability to purchase weapons, legally, is not an isolated case as weapons are readily acquired anywhere in the world either over the counter or through thousands of black market dealers.

The only way the ensuing massacre could have been stopped was if Whitman's school psychologist, who knew Whitman was suffering from some degree of mental illness, reported Whitman's conditions to the authorities. The government could then have placed Whitman's name on a national 'do not sell' list, so Whitman could not buy a weapon from a legally recognized gun dealer in the country. However, at the time,

Whitman's mental illness was far from being an established fact, a national "do not sell to" database did not exist, and thus there was no mechanism in place to weed Whitman out from the rest of the population. He was invisible.

Choosing the Right Weapons

Whitman had a variety of weapons to choose from, not just from his own collection, but from whatever he could buy over the counter. Whitman ended up taking several different types of weapons to suit a variety of needs. First, he took a .357 magnum Smith and Wesson revolver, a Galesi-Brescia pistol, and a 9mm Luger pistol for personal protection. He also took a 12-gauge shotgun he modified the day of the attack, sawing off the barrel and the buttstock for close-in work. Whitman also took a .35 caliber Remington semi-automatic rifle and a .30 caliber M-1 carbine, both of which could maintain an accurate, high rate of fire out to several hundred meters. However, Whitman's real work horse was a 6 mm Remington bolt-action rifle with a four power scope. Since the Remington 6 mm is a flat shooting rifle and Whitman practiced shooting it so often, he could consistently hit man-size targets at 500 meters or more. Married up to the 6 mm rifle were soft-point 6 mm bullets designed to flatten and expand upon hitting a target, causing enormous soft-tissue damage.

It is important to note Whitman's most effective weapon was a common deer rifle. This rifle was not particularly sophisticated and did not have features common to modern sniper rifles like bipod legs and a high-power scope. Compared to today's powerhouse sniper rifles like the .338 caliber, .410 caliber, and .50 caliber variants, a 6 mm round is relatively small and lacks knock-down power. Despite the limitations of his weapon system, Whitman managed to inflict significant damage from accurate fire developed through constant practice.

Infiltrating the Tower

After Whitman packed up the necessary supplies in his footlocker, he had to get to his shooting platform, the University of Texas Tower, all while hiding his true intentions. Because Whitman was a registered student at the University of Texas, he knew what security measures the University had and he knew how to beat them. Part of his plan to infiltrate the University was to hide all of his supplies and weapons in the footlocker. The footlocker was in fact a concealment device, allowing Whitman to transfer his weapons in it without raising suspicion.

In addition to this, Whitman put on a pair of blue nylon coveralls over his red plaid shirt and jeans so he looked like a janitor or repairman. The real genius of this is Whitman matched his clothing to compliment his concealment device. Whitman's plan was to look like a person in the service industry who could move in the open, unquestioned by the general public. Whitman did not sneak onto the campus like a thief in the night, he did not cleverly bypass any sophisticated security measures, nor did he create an elaborate plan. Whitman put his guns in a footlocker, placed the footlocker on a dolly, put on a pair of coveralls, and walked right by the people he would later kill. Deception was Whitman's greatest tool.

Whitman's view of the campus from atop the tower.

When Whitman showed up at the University of Texas at Austin security gate, he was dressed in his coveralls with his footlocker in the back of his car and the dolly in the trunk. Because Whitman was a student at the University and a lab assistant, he was issued a Carrier Identification Card for students who needed to transport heavy or bulky materials onto campus. The security guard noticed the footlocker in the car but thought nothing of it and issued Charles a loading zone permit for 40 minutes.

Because Whitman used a believable cover story - he needed to unload equipment at one of the campus buildings - there was nothing out of the ordinary to arouse the guard's suspicion.

Once getting past the security guard, the rest was even easier for Whitman. He parked his car near the Tower, took the dolly out of the trunk, and placed his footlocker on it. Then, Whitman wheeled his footlocker into the Tower, onto the elevator and up to the 27th floor. Many people saw Whitman walking calmly to the Tower, but no one had any reason to stop or question him because he looked exactly as he intended to look - as a serviceman working for the University. Anything could have been in the footlocker: cleaning supplies, repair parts, or construction material.

Once Whitman got up to the 27th floor and dragged his dolly up three small flights of stairs to the 28th floor of the observation deck, he still had to get past the receptionist and other people who might be on the deck. Once Whitman discovered the Tower receptionist was alone, he bashed in her skull and hid her body. Whitman killed the receptionist so quietly and quickly, several minutes later visitors leaving the observation deck actually walked by Whitman and said, “hello.” They saw stains on the floor, but they did not realize they were from blood.

Unfortunately, another group of people ascended the final few stairs to the receptionist’s area and were confronted by Whitman, who was now armed with his sawed-off shotgun. Whitman shot this family at close range, killing a boy and a girl, and seriously wounding two others. Whitman then barricaded the doorway to the receptionist area with a table and chairs and blocked the door opening onto the observation deck with the dolly.

It is important to note the several shotgun blasts Whitman fired at the visitors were never heard by people outside the building. While the blasts must have been deafening in the enclosed, concrete hallways, this same sturdy construction effectively contained the sounds of the shotgun. The dynamics of sound and how sound functions in an urban environment with thousands of walls, sidewalks, patios, buildings were to play a key role in the carnage to come. Whitman’s shooting would start at 11:48 a.m. and end 96 minutes later with his death. In between these times, Whitman brought death and agony to scores of people from atop his new shooting platform, the Texas Tower.

Tactical Significance of the University of Texas Tower

At 231 feet above the ground, the observation deck of the 307-foot tall University of Texas Tower dominated the surrounding terrain. From the Tower, Whitman had good observation and clear fields of fire in all directions. Because the Tower allowed Whitman to fire in a 360-degree circle, he could access the scores of microenvironments, insulated from one another, making up any urban area. That meant Whitman could shoot someone 500 meters east of the Tower, walk to the other side of the Tower, and then shoot someone 500 meters to the west of the Tower. Since the two different victims were a kilometer from each other, they never saw each other as they were separated not only by distance, but by numerous intervening buildings. As a result, one victim could be shot and killed while the second one had no idea what just happened until they were themselves shot and killed.

Gunshots and Sound in an Urban Environment

Whitman's shooting spree is important to analyze as a case study due in part to the dynamics of sound and how the noise of gunshots work in an urban environment. For instance, people who were near the tower when Whitman started shooting said they heard a "popping" sound. They did not recognize the sounds as gunshots. The first victim, Claire Wilson, had no idea she was shot. Thomas Eckman, who was standing next to Claire, asked her what was wrong (he too had no idea she was shot) and was then shot himself, dying instantly.

Thomas Ashton saw the bodies falling to the pavement and looked towards the tower to see what was going on. As he did so, he was shot in the chest and killed. He never realized someone was shooting at the other people or himself.

Charlotte Darehshori takes cover from Whitman while another student lies wounded.

People in nearby buildings, with the windows and doors shut, because the air conditioning was on, could not hear the shooting outside and if they did hear something, they did not recognize the sounds as gunshots. Consequently, people on campus left the relative safety of indoors, ran outside to see what was happening, and then were shot themselves. Other people heard the gunshots, but thought the sounds were coming from inside a building. These same curious people then walked outside, in plain view of hundreds of other people, and were shot.

The microenvironments preventing outside sounds from entering them, like vehicles, meant people could take a bus or drive their car into range of the tower and not know there was any shooting until they got off the bus or exited their vehicle. When these people heard a shot after entering their new environment, they had little chance to recognize it for what it was or where it came from. Even people walking down the street could walk around a corner and enter Whitman’s field of view, oblivious to anything going on until the shooting resumed.

One of the fundamental features of shooting in an urban environment is the sound of a gunshot echoes off of the surrounding buildings, pavement, sidewalks, and cars. This echoing means a person may hear and recognize the gunshot but not know where it came from. Some people on campus heard and recognized the gunshots, but assumed they came from a building several hundred meters from the Tower. This misjudgment resulted in people hiding from where they erroneously thought the gunfire originated from. Consequently, these people hid from the wrong building, putting themselves into plain view of Whitman and the Tower. They thought they were safe from the source of gunfire when in fact their reactions made them the next victim.

One man heard the gunshots, but thought it was the backfiring of a car. This same man then looked towards the tower, stated he could see the shooter, and was then shot through the mouth, killing him instantly.

Other people thought the gunshots were actually sounds from nail-driving guns used in construction. Still others thought the sounds were wooden planks slapping on concrete, or even the school's Reserve Officer Training Course members shooting blanks.

Whitman's Tactics

Whitman conducted an aggressive assault from his perch above the University. He moved constantly on the deck, taking a single shot and then moving to another position. He repeatedly popped-up over the railing of the observation deck, aimed, shot, crouched back down, and then moved to another position. When moving crouched down, the concrete parapet surrounding the observation deck blocked any view of Whitman so he could not be seen by the people below him. Several people saw puffs of smoke coming from the tower after Whitman's shots, some people saw a gun barrel poking over the concrete parapet, others saw the sun shining off his scope or binoculars, and some saw him pop his head up. Because Whitman fired from every side of the Tower and no one could actually see him, the people below did not know how many shooters there actually were. Many assumed there were several snipers instead of a lone, suicidal shooter.

Whitman tried to maintain his situational awareness by tuning his portable transistor radio to KTBC, a local radio station, allowing him to listen to a reporter describe what was going on at the University of Texas. In this manner, Whitman knew what the people below him knew and used this inside knowledge to better target his victims. The press became Whitman's personal damage assessment tool, enabling Whitman to realize the extent and effects of his shooting. Ironically, the radio eventually contributed to Whitman's demise since he turned it up so loud he did not hear the local police dismantle his makeshift barricade or loudly remove the dolly jamming shut the door to the observatory deck. While Whitman was kept up to date on what reporters on the ground saw hundreds of meters away, he lost awareness of what was happening on the observation deck, enabling policemen to gun him down, point blank.

Even up until the very end of the shootout, Whitman could have escaped. And it would not have taken an elaborate plan to successfully get away. Whitman could have simply walked down the stairs of the tower and pretended to be just another scared campus student. Because no one below him knew what he looked like, never mind who was actually doing the shooting, Whitman could have easily intermingled among the surrounding people, blended in with the crowd, and escaped among the confusion. Obviously, Whitman did not plan on getting away – he conducted the entire attack in a manner that would eventually get himself killed. After all, Whitman killed his wife and mother before his massacre and left handwritten notes admitting to his guilt. On top of this, Whitman's footlocker holding his arsenal and supplies actually had his full name spray painted on it, leaving little doubt as to his identity once he was killed or apprehended. While he could have escaped, Whitman intended all along to die in the tower.

A bullet's-eye view of the tower.

Counter-Sniper Tactics

While Whitman's killing spree is instructive on the dynamics of conducting an urban sniping attack, it is equally educational on how to counter an urban sniper. While Whitman shot at the local, unarmed citizens, many of the people departed and returned with their own hunting rifles. These armed citizens then opened fire on Whitman in an attempt to kill him, forcing Whitman to keep his head down and restricting his movement on the observation deck.

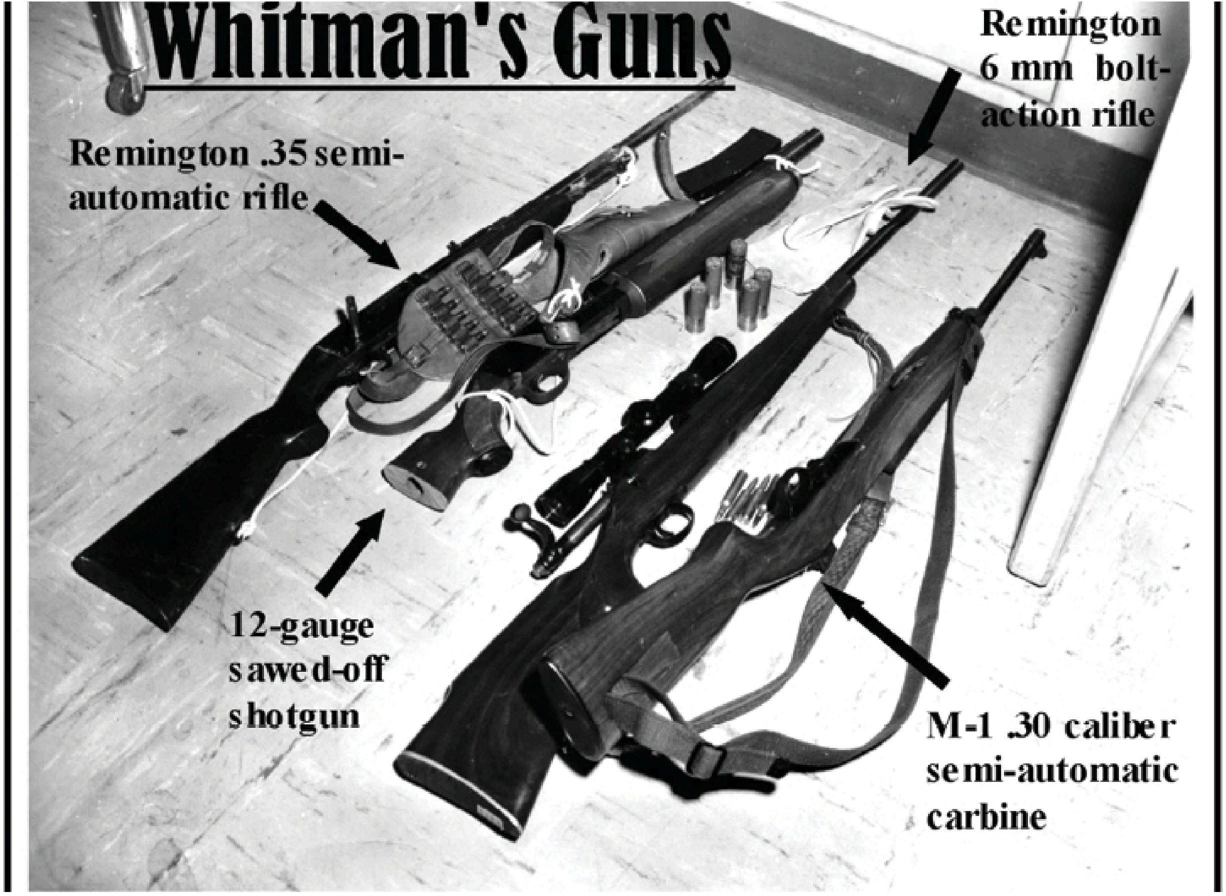
However, the observation deck's concrete parapet, combined with the fact the armed citizens were firing upwards at an extreme angle, protected Whitman. Nevertheless, Whitman was forced to shoot through the rain spouts located on each side of the observation deck's four parapets just to stay alive. Unfortunately, by firing through the rain spouts, Whitman was absolutely invisible from below and invulnerable from return rifle fire. Even though dozens of armed citizens fired hundreds of rounds back at Whitman with high-powered, scoped hunting rifles, he was never wounded. Not even a scratch.

The local law enforcement agency, the Austin Police Department (APD), was unprepared to deal with a suicidal sniper firing from a fortress. The APD did not have a SWAT team and the best they could do at the time was arm individual police officers with civilian deer rifles. In one location, several law-enforcement personnel were positioned at an adjacent building, armed with high-powered rifles, scopes, and binoculars, returning fire each time they saw Whitman. This prevented Whitman from sticking his head over the parapet, but he continued to shoot from the rain spouts, impervious to their fire. Because Whitman had such a good vantage point from which to observe his targets, he was able to pin down hundreds of people, to include police officers. Moving across any open area was dangerous, especially after Whitman successfully shot so many moving targets.

Because Whitman pinned down so many people, the APD considered using a helicopter as a shooting platform to get to him, but the APD also thought it was too vulnerable to gunfire. One armed police officer and a pilot did fly a small, cloth-skinned airplane by the tower in an attempt to get a shot at Whitman. However, the plane vibrated so much the officer quickly discovered he could not get off an accurate shot. Compounding the problem was the thermal lift from hot air rising off the pavement causing the airplane to bounce. Whitman did take notice of this new threat and fired two rounds through the plane's cloth fabric, forcing the vulnerable plane to back off and keep its distance.

While most police officers were pinned down or returning ineffective fire, a few made it to an underground tunnel housing the school's telephone, power, and water lines connecting the campus buildings. These police officers recognized only underground movement, providing 360-degree protection, could get them into the tower both safely and undetected. Since airplanes and long-range counter-sniper fire had no effect on Whitman in his fortress, the officers realized only a close-in assault would solve the problem.

After these officers infiltrated the tower through the tunnel, they worked their way upstairs. Between the 27th floor and the observation deck they found the surviving family members of Whitman's initial, close quarters, shotgun blasts. These terrified survivors provided the police with critical intelligence that there was only one sniper and he was up on the observation deck.

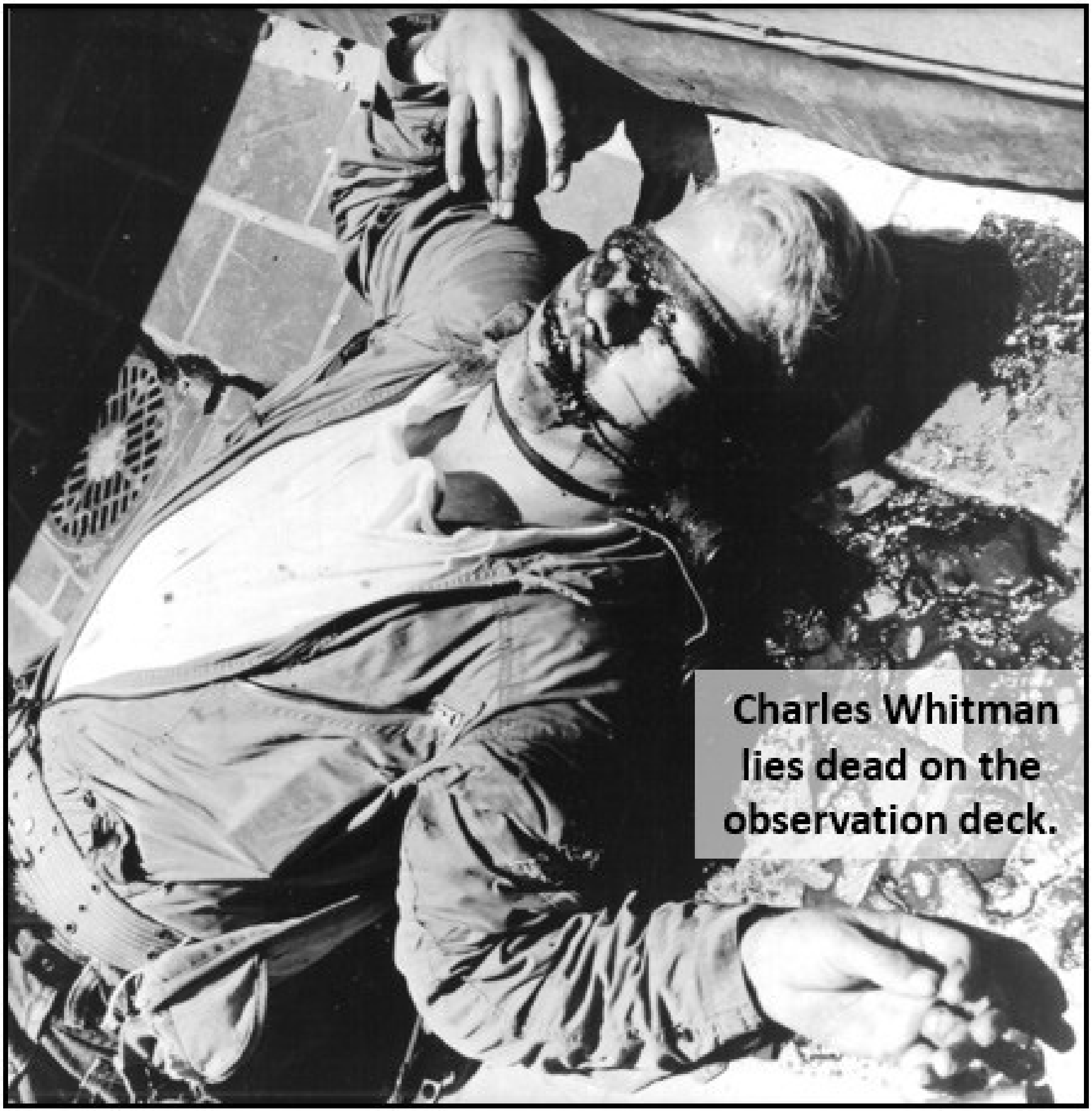

Whitman's Guns
Remington 6 mm bolt-action rifle
Remington .35 semi-automatic rifle
12-gauge sawed-off shotgun
M-1 .30 caliber semi-automatic carbine

The cumulative effect of everything going on around Whitman meant he lost situational awareness of what was happening on the observation deck and the reception area. Because he was focused on shooting targets hundreds of meters away, because people were shooting back at him and planes were flying overhead, and because his portable radio was turned up full volume, Whitman was unaware people were closing in on him.

The police who entered the Tower were able to move upstairs, get into the reception area, and push out onto the observation deck oblivious to Whitman. Once they secured a foothold on the deck, it was not long before Whitman was shot at close range, dying of wounds sustained from a shotgun and a pistol. Whitman was well-prepared for a long-distance shoot out but was a sitting duck to aggressive police officers willing to do close-in work and risk it all to stop the killing.

Lessons Learned from the Texas Tower Tragedy

While the University of Texas at Austin is an urban area, it was not a densely packed area like New York City, Chicago, or Los Angeles. Imagine if Whitman was shooting in an area packed with high-rise buildings, with thousands of pedestrians drowning in a honking sea of car horns. In a heavily urbanized area, Whitman could have shot a hundred people before they realized what was going on, instead of the forty-six victims he ended up shooting on campus. What if Whitman used a suppressor on his rifle? If people had problems identifying the gunfire on a bright sunny day in a relatively open campus area, think of the problems people would have locating a gunshot sounding no louder than a car door being shut.



Charles Whitman lies dead on the observation deck.

The reader must keep in mind all this death and chaos was caused by a lone gunman with no security element. What if Whitman had one or two other people providing security for him as he fired? What if this security element booby trapped the 27th floor of the tower and the stairs and elevator leading up to the observation deck with high-explosives and detonated these explosives as the police entered? What if the 27th floor was so damaged from the explosives the responding police officers could not physically get to the observation deck? Then, the local police would not have gotten Whitman in the way they did. In fact, no one could have gotten to him in a close assault. The police would have to evacuate the general area to remove Whitman’s targets - but hundreds were already pinned down and could not move (at least during daylight hours). The police could try and starve Whitman out, which would take days because of his supplies, or the police could try and talk him down, which did not seem likely. The only option would be to call in the military for an all-out assault.

Whitman was effective for many reasons, but mainly because he had an unusual mindset: he was on a suicide mission and the only way to stop him was to kill him. As a result, Whitman did not care that he quickly gave away his position by firing scores of shots from the same location. As Charles Whitman so grimly proved, the urban sniper can be employed as a terror tool. In a crowded, urban area, from an ideal firing position, scores of people can be shot and killed by a lone gunman. However, employment of a sniper as a terror tool means the gunman is on a suicide mission. repeated shots from the same position, as Charles Whitman showed, are a death sentence.

Chapter 15

The Troubles

It seemed to me that prolonged sniping from a static position had no more in common with guerrilla theory than mass confrontations. One-shot sniping was in fact the theory of the guerrilla rifle. It turned up, struck once and vanished, presenting no target in return.

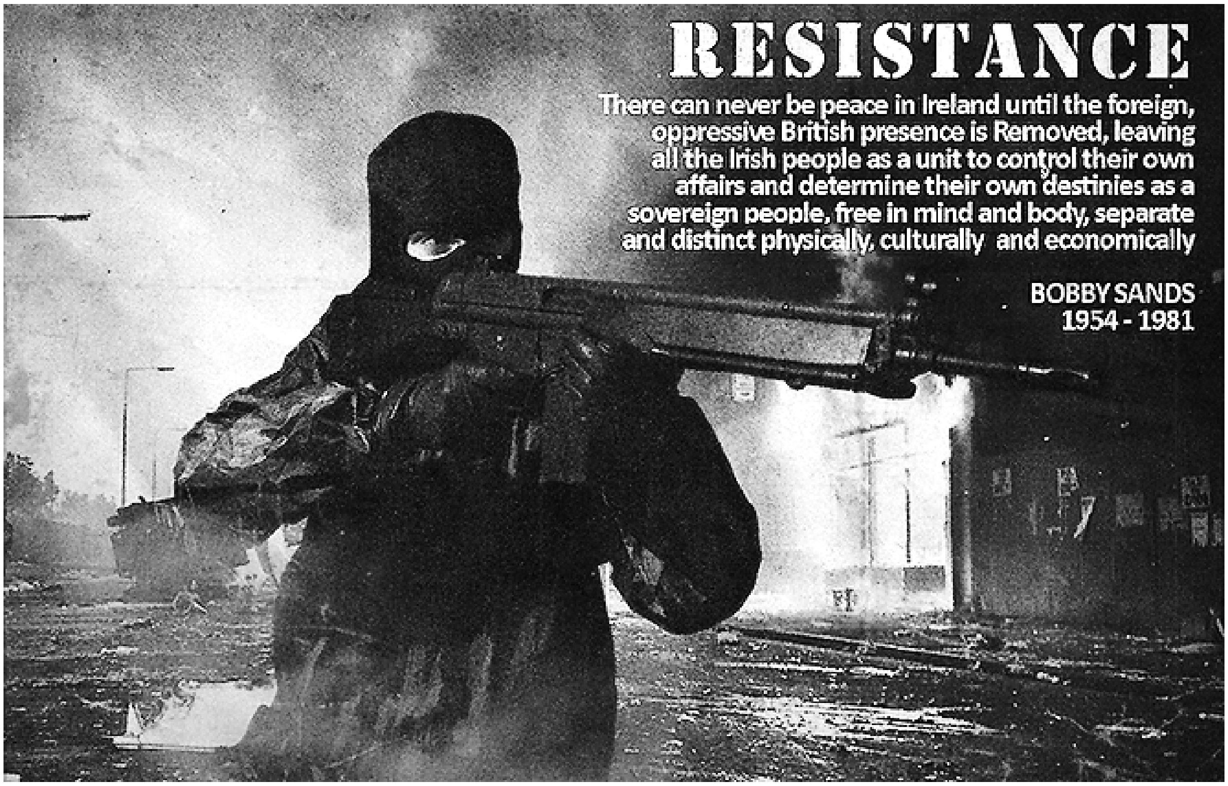
- Sean MacStiofain, originator of the 'One-Shot Sniping' method

The Troubles, 1969-1998

The conflict in Northern Ireland can trace its more modern roots to England's colonization of the island, starting with the founding of the Plantation of Ulster in 1609. After arriving in Ulster, the Protestant English and Scottish settlers, with the backing of London, systematically confiscated the surrounding property from the local Catholic Irish inhabitants. Here lies the heart of the existing English-Irish conflict. From 1609 onwards, Protestant England remained determined to hold onto one of its earliest colonies, while Irish resistance groups have tried to get their land back. Today, one can claim England won this centuries-old conflict because Ireland is divided and Northern Ireland is still under sway from London. However, England's 17th Century Ulster Plantation has proved to be a bleeding ulcer the English body has suffered from ever since.

The bleeding soon began with the Irish Confederate Wars, fought from 1641-1653, fueled by the massacres of Protestants and Catholics by both sides. These wars eventually cost hundreds of thousands of Irish lives, not to gunshot wounds or flying shrapnel, but to disease and famine. Next came the Williamite War, fought from 1688-1691, resulting in solidified English control of Ireland for the next hundred years until the failed Irish Rebellion of 1798. More than a century would past until the famed Easter Rising of 1916, which was followed quickly by the Irish War of Independence, 1919-1921. Upon conclusion of this war, Ireland was able to wrest away twenty-six counties from an England bled deathly white from four years of slaughter in the trenches during the Great War. Despite this Irish victory, England and its Protestant colony maintained a death grip on the remaining six counties that became Northern Ireland and are still under English rule to this very day.

The creation of an independent Ireland, less the six Northern counties, satisfied most Irish since they believed that was the best deal they could get. But remnants of the original Irish Republican Army (IRA) were unwilling to write off the northern counties so quickly. Seeking to take advantage of England’s weakened state during World War II, the IRA waged their unsuccessful Northern Campaign from 1942-1944. In this campaign, the IRA intended to take control of Northern Ireland if and when Hitler defeated England, but with Germany’s unconditional surrender in 1945, this dream never materialized. Ten years later, the IRA was ready again to try to overthrow the government of Northern Ireland and create a united Ireland. Now, their enemy was post-war England, a country that had recovered from the previous world war and intent on keeping a hold on their shrinking colonial empire. The IRA’s uninspiring 1956-1962 Border Campaign failed to garner any widespread support and the effort collapsed. At this stage of their existence the IRA was severely weakened as an organization - almost extinct. But, the IRA would unexpectedly rebound from this latest defeat, and by the end of the decade, the IRA would be resurrected and stronger than ever.


RESISTANCE
There can never be peace in Ireland until the foreign, oppressive British presence is Removed, leaving all the Irish people as a unit to control their own affairs and determine their own destinies as a sovereign people, free in mind and body, separate and distinct physically, culturally and economically
BOBBY SANDS
1954 - 1981

The Troubles Ignite

Many argue The Troubles began in 1968 when widespread rioting and public disorder broke out during the marches of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA). The NICRA used the marches to bring attention to political and social discrimination by the Protestant government against the Irish Catholics living in Northern Ireland. Extremist elements of the Protestant population saw these marches as a threat to their political power and established way of life, resulting in violent clashes between mobs of Protestant 'loyalists' and Catholic 'nationalists.' The Protestants weathered many a storm over the past centuries and this was just one more opportunity to put the Irish back in their place.

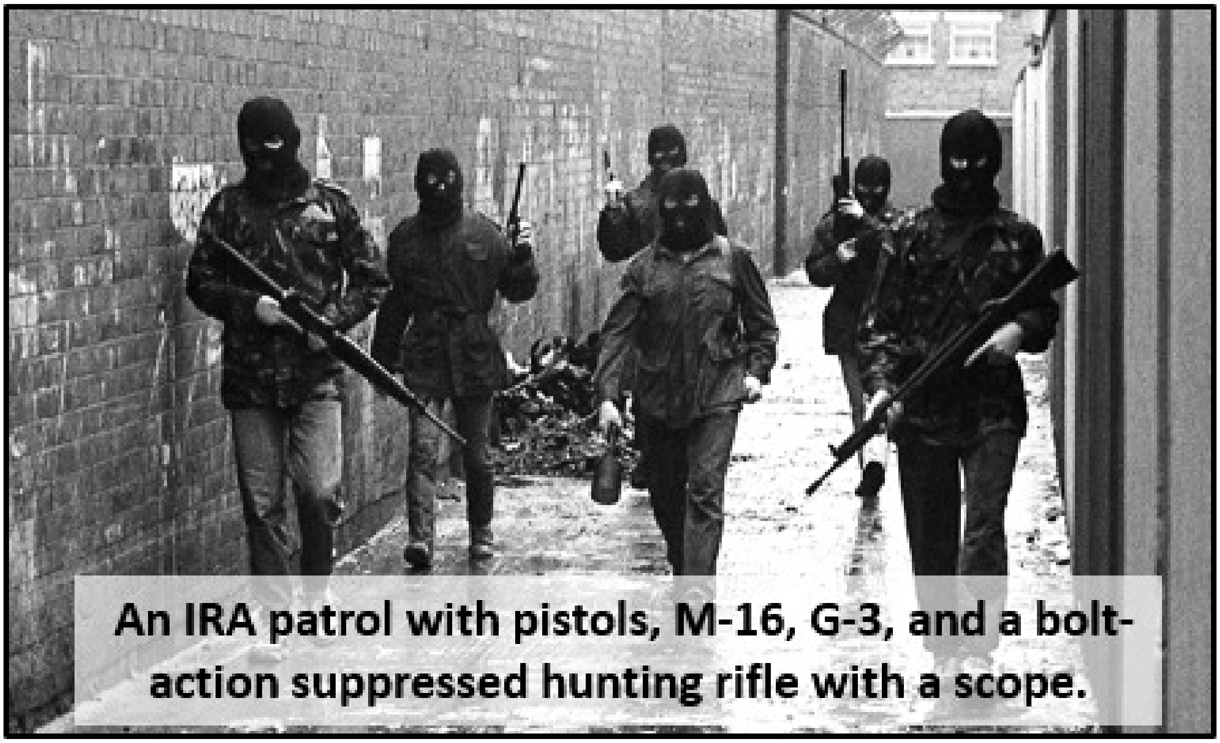
In 1969, as the clashes between Protestants and Catholics escalated, the Northern Ireland police (the Royal Ulster Constabulary - RUC) and the British Army deployed large numbers of officers and soldiers to the six counties in an attempt to quell the violence. Instead of normalizing the situation, this show of force was the equivalent of dumping gasoline on a smoldering flame. The Catholics did not view the police and military as enforcing law and order, they saw them as advancing the Protestants' political interests. Subsequent attacks by Protestant loyalist paramilitaries like the Ulster Defense Association, the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Ulster Freedom Fighters, and the Shankill Butchers, who committed horrible acts of terror against Catholic communities, demanded a response. Who was going to right these wrongs and protect Northern Ireland's Catholic communities from British oppression and loyalist murderers? The IRA would.

It was the Catholic community's perceived (and real) need for someone to protect their interests that breathed new life into a listless organization. In 1969, the IRA was ill-prepared to protect its communities. Some hardliners wanted an instant armed response against the established government, while others were unsure. Because of these diverging interests, the IRA split into the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA (PIRA). The PIRA was determined to take armed action to overthrow the existing government of Northern Ireland. With the PIRA leadership ready to act and Britain's own heavy handed tactics alienating the Catholic population, the ranks of the PIRA swelled. For every house the Protestants burned and for every Irishman the RUC beat up, the PIRA's ranks grew. According to early PIRA leader Sean MacStiofain, the Belfast branch of the PIRA alone skyrocketed from only fifty members in 1969 to over 1200 in 1971. While the British often get credit for their counter-insurgency efforts against the PIRA, one should consider the fact they helped create the problem by alienating the Catholic population.

The Sniping Begins

Despite the increased support for their organization, the PIRA leadership understood they could not defeat the combined might of the British Army, the RUC, and the Protestant paramilitaries in a conventional test of strength. Instead, they would have to rely on a protracted guerrilla war where guile, cunning, and superior intelligence would accomplish their political objectives. One of the elements of this long war that would enable the PIRA to inflict casualties on their much stronger enemies and get away with it was the sniper.

One of the early leaders of the PIRA, Sean MacStiofain, is credited with establishing the PIRA's first organized sniper campaign to include the new 'one-shot sniper' tactic for the resurgent PIRA. At the beginning of The Troubles, MacStiofain was thoroughly unimpressed with the way PIRA snipers conducted their operations in the cities. These snipers fired multiple shots from a single location, thus exposing them to effective enemy counter-fire. Not only did MacStiofain find this lack of urban snipercraft to be ineffective, but he also correctly saw it as a violation of the fundamental principles of guerrilla warfare theory. MacStiofain himself commented, "When a sniper did that he was breaking the guiding principle, giving away his location and presenting himself as a target to a counter-sniper or machine-gun fire from armored cars. But what gave away his location was his rifle itself every time he used it. One-shot sniping was in fact the theory of the guerrilla rifle. It turned up, struck once and vanished, presenting no target in return."



An IRA patrol with pistols, M-16, G-3, and a bolt-action suppressed hunting rifle with a scope.

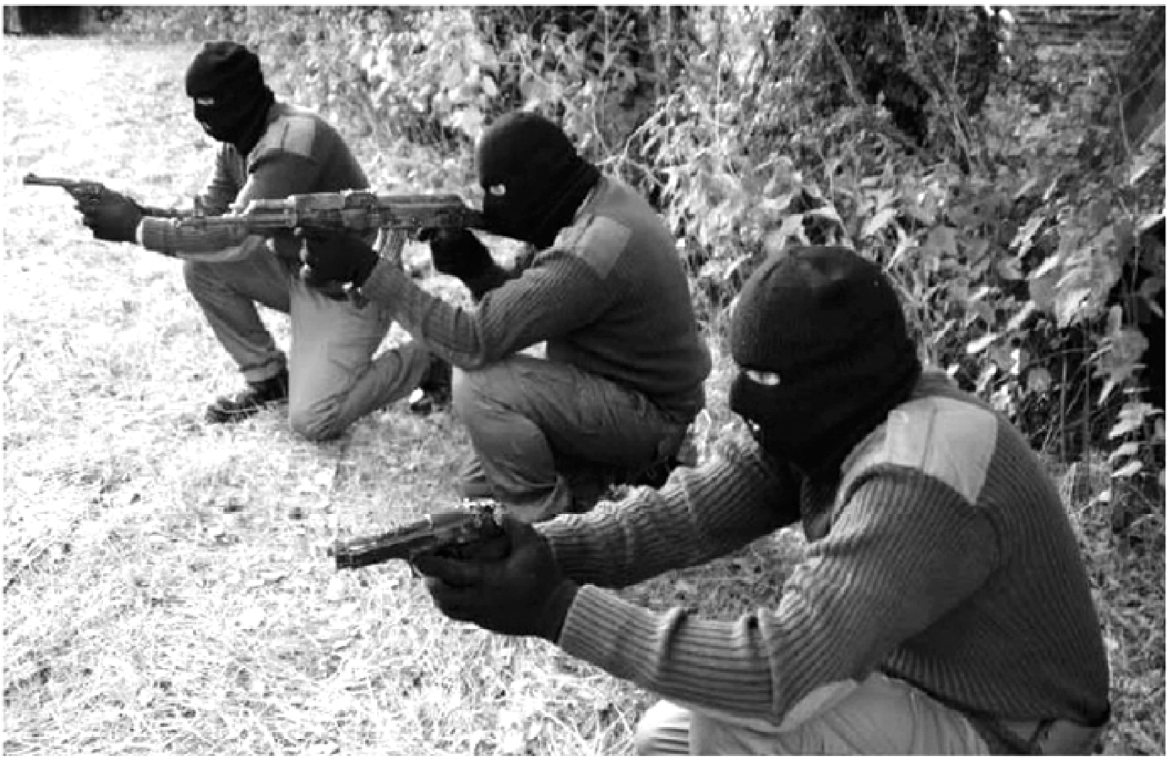
MacStiofain's new method was simple. A PIRA sniper would take a single shot from a concealed hide site and then disappear. They would not take a second shot, no matter what. If they missed their target on the first shot or had a lucrative second target, they still only took a single shot. MacStiofain understood it would take a systematic effort by the PIRA leadership to train their snipers in this new methodology. Consequently, the PIRA established new sniper courses where they hammered the principles of successful urban sniping into the shooters' heads. The PIRA trained their snipers to work in pairs where the best shooter was the trigger man and the second-best shot was the observer. MacStiofain explained, "The principle was to fire only one shot, after which, hit or miss – and this was drummed in until they practically screamed – the team went immediately to ground. It was impossible to locate their position provided they fired only one round."

With this new training program in place, PIRA snipers began to have better success against the British security forces. Fewer PIRA snipers were getting caught or wounded and most were able to make their shot and get away if they followed the discipline of one-shot sniping. In the summer of 1972, the PIRA expanded their sniper operations as MacStiofain notes, "One-shot sniping was introduced on a wide scale in Derry, Belfast, Armagh and some rural areas. Crossmaglen developed an exceptionally good unit which exploited the terrain and used the sympathy of the local people to the utmost. Experience gained in engagements there taught the value of ensuring that each position had a good exit ready before the team went into action."

This effective use of PIRA snipers, which inflicted increasing British casualties, gave the Irish communities a much needed morale boost while, at the same time, showed the British government they had a long struggle ahead of them. The effect of the PIRA's sniping campaign was such that rumors started to spread about a new threat. MacStiofain explains, "After the casualties in West Belfast, a story was fed to one of the more sensational tabloids that the PIRA were employing a crack mercenary sniper from Germany on contract. This phantom figure had a great run, and I believe he was referred to in Continental and other papers as well. He was supposed to be paid a bonus of five hundred pounds for each British soldier he killed. In between times, he lived under heavy guard in a house in the Falls, wearing dark glasses and eating carrots to protect his night vision. Nobody, of course, ever interviewed him, for the simple reason he never existed. But that didn't affect the reputation he achieved. It seemed that if the British said the casualties were caused by a sniper from Mars, it would have been printed as fact."

Even Gerry Adams himself, the current president of the Republican political party Sinn Fein and also an elected Minister of Parliament for West Belfast, was accused of being involved in sniping at British soldiers in that wild summer of 1972. Former British paratrooper Nigel Mumford witnessed the shooting of his fellow soldier, Francis Bell, who was killed by a hidden sniper while they were on patrol in the Ballymurphy Estate, Belfast. After the shooting, Mumford and his fellow soldiers searched a nearby apartment complex where they thought the shot came from. During the raid, Mumford said he saw Adams. While another PIRA member was ultimately convicted of the shooting, rumors abounded Adams either organized the sniper attack or at least knew of it ahead of time.

It is interesting to note before MacStiofain's efforts in 1972, the PIRA lacked a basic understanding of urban guerrilla sniping. Up until that point, the PIRA was primarily a rural-centric organization. They were still unused to the extreme scrutiny any sniper would be placed under while working in cities like Derry and Belfast. Fortunately, for the PIRA, MacStiofain was the right man at the right time to bring the PIRA out of the dark ages. MacStiofain possessed an unusually agile mind and he always looked for new ways to modernize the movement. When MacStiofain started off with the IRA in the 1950s, he operated in an urban cell in England. He recognized that the IRA at that time was not prepared for urban guerrilla warfare and did not have the equipment, training, or mindset to successfully work in the cities. However, MacStiofain tried everything he could to change this like securing modern communications equipment in order for the IRA to monitor and listen in on British police and military radio traffic.



Members of the Continuity IRA, a splinter group of the Provisional IRA, train with their weapons.

Consequently, when the newly independent PIRA began its guerrilla campaign in 1970 and started its sniper attacks, MacStiofain was there to modernize the PIRA’s outdated tactics. MacStiofain understood the single most incriminating element of a sniper attack was the gunshot. And since the PIRA had not yet evolved into understanding the tactical importance of using suppressors, the one-shot sniping rule was the next best thing. Any experienced military sniper would see the one-shot sniping approach as common sense and part of their standard operating procedure. But, to the inexperienced gunmen fighting for the PIRA in the streets of Belfast, this was a new methodology minimizing their operational signature and allowed them to shoot hundreds of British soldiers and RUC officers without getting caught.

Getting Weapons

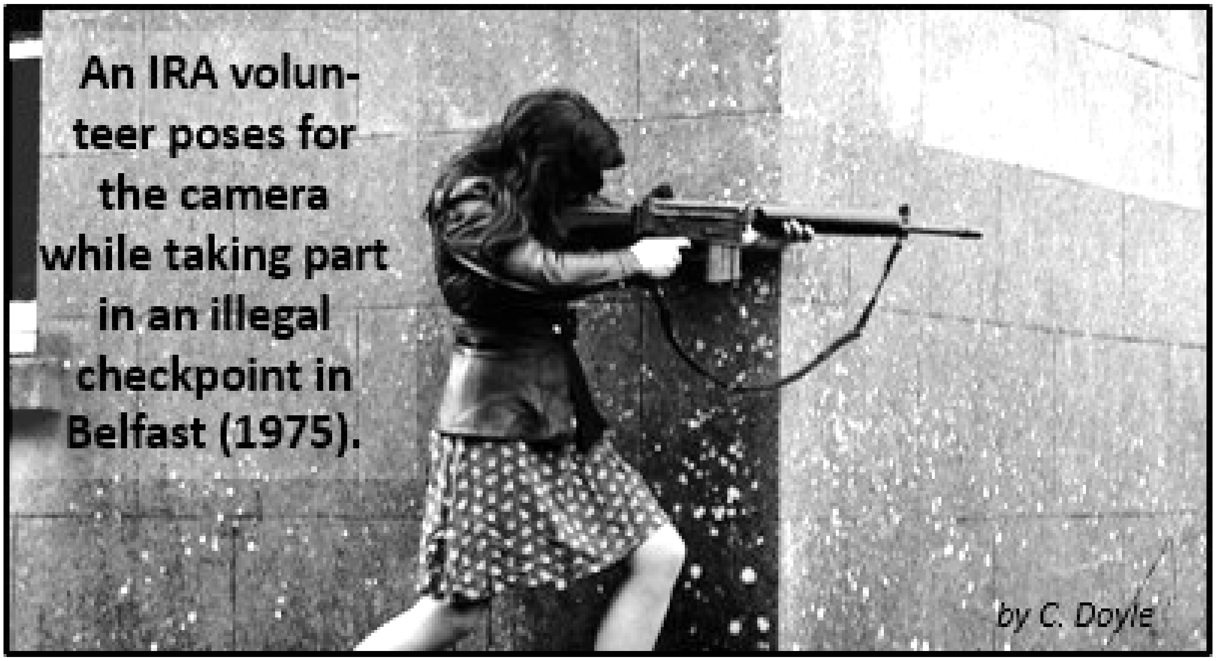
The PIRA’s new sniping tactics were a much needed change in the way they conducted their sniping business, but they still needed rifles to shoot. Getting good sniper weapons was always a logistical challenge for the PIRA because the British and Northern Ireland authorities did everything they could to keep weapons out of the hands of potential snipers. As we will see later in this chapter, the government of Northern Ireland eventually instituted some of the most restrictive gun control laws in the world just for this reason.

One of the ways the PIRA got its weapons in the early years was from breaking into poorly secured British military bases and then stealing and driving off with their weapons. In this way, the PIRA was able to procure hundreds of weapons to include issued British Army rifles like the accurate, bolt-action Lee-Enfield .303. The PIRA also used other methods like stealing rifles off the docks as they were shipped in from mainland England, buying guns and ammunition from British soldiers who were looking to supplement their low army salaries, and by going through established black market arms dealers who had no problem selling weapons to the PIRA to make a profit.

While getting good sniper rifles here and there provided a trickle of much needed weapons, what the growing PIRA really needed was an established weapons supply system that could secretly and securely provide reliable weapons to support a guerrilla war that might last decades. As the PIRA's campaign took off in 1969, Sean MacStiofain applied his guerrilla mind and organizational ability towards creating such a system. MacStiofain realized when the newly appointed Provisional Army Council was created, the PIRA's weapon situation was in poor shape. Local Republican defense committees were forced to acquire a motley collection of second-rate weapons by hook or crook, from anyone who was willing to supply them. Interestingly enough, even some Protestant Loyalist arms merchants were willing to deal with the fledgling PIRA in order to make a dollar. However, these arms dealers knew the PIRA was desperate for guns and charged them ridiculously high prices.

In response, MacStiofain and the leadership of the PIRA created a supply department that employed procurement specialists who did nothing but acquire weapons through the black market. Now, a single PIRA entity purchased the weapons for the entire movement, as opposed to different local buyers competing for the same arms. In this manner, the PIRA brought down the prices of the black market arms dealers so they could buy more weapons for the movement. The PIRA's quartermaster section did more than just acquire guns, they also took responsibility for ensuring they were serviceable and ready for combat. The quartermasters inspected the weapons and repaired them if required. This type of close-in professional inspection was necessary because something as simple as a failed firing pin could result in the untimely death of the volunteer whose life depended on a perfectly functioning weapon.

By taking an organized systematic approach, the PIRA created a covert logistical system that could provide the weapons the movement demanded. This system proved to be critical because there was a constant requirement for weapons as the guerrilla war devoured guns just like it consumed men and money. Weapons caches would be discovered by informants and turned over to the police, rifles broke down through constant use, and sometimes guns had to be unceremoniously ditched after a shooting in order to protect the user from being caught in the possession of incriminating physical evidence. Since the weapon supply system the PIRA set up in the early part of their movement relied mainly on firearms procured domestically, the British were able to slowly put a squeeze on these efforts through stricter gun laws, tighter border controls, and an increasingly intense counter-insurgency campaign. However, the PIRA's movement still demanded firepower. But where would a new supply of modern, effective weapons come from? Perhaps the PIRA's brothers across the sea, in the New World, could provide some help.


An IRA volunteer poses for the camera while taking part in an illegal checkpoint in Belfast (1975).

by C. Doyle

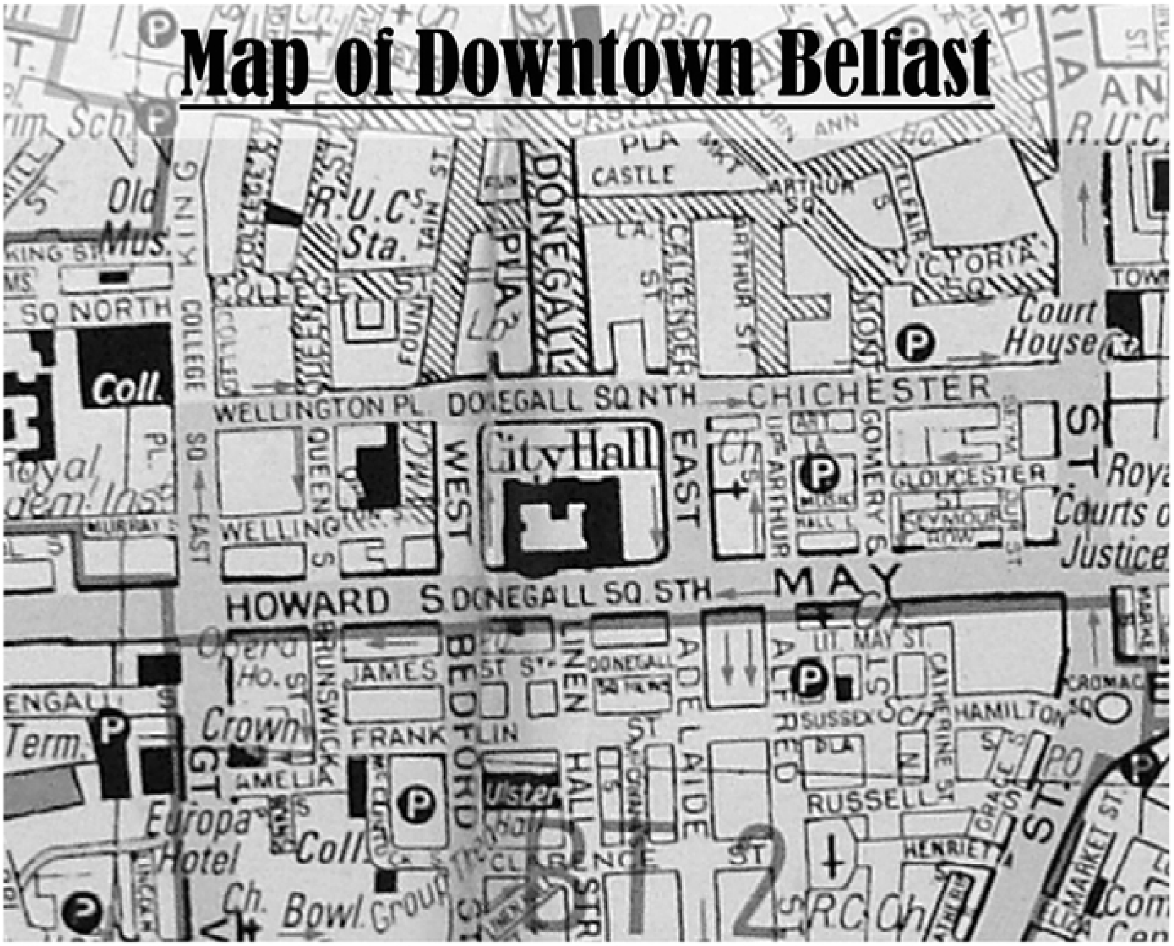
Friends in the United States

One of these Irish brothers was George Harrison, who moved from Ireland, across the Atlantic to New York City in 1938, and helped set up the PIRA's North American gunrunning network. Harrison was primarily a deal maker - he took money that was supplied to him and then made the actual transactions with a variety of gun merchants both in the United States and overseas, like the Corsican mob. Harrison was eventually caught and tried in the U.S. in 1981 but was acquitted. By then, it was too late. It is estimated over the course of twenty-five years, Harrison successfully infiltrated 2,500 weapons and more than a million rounds of ammunition into Ireland. The work of Harrison alone was enough to sustain the PIRA movement for years and to keep PIRA snipers plying their deadly trade indefinitely.

Harrison was able to buy these weapons only because of the financial muscle provided by the Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAID). NORAID was created in 1969 as a legitimate fund raising organization to provide financial help for the people of Northern Ireland, like families of PIRA political prisoners who suffered under the jackboot of British rule. NORAID's mission statement says, "Irish Northern Aid is an American based membership organization that supports through peaceful means, the establishment of a democratic 32-county Ireland. Our Strategy: To develop a broad coalition of supporters for Irish Unity through organizing and educating the public, our members, political leaders, and the media. To support the current Peace Process, including the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement which was endorsed by the vast majority of the Irish people. To support a process of National reconciliation and equality for all the citizens of Ireland. Membership: In keeping with the principles of the 1916 Proclamation, Irish Northern Aid is open to anyone who shares these values."

While NORAID insisted they did not support the PIRA, the American courts won a decision in 1981 forcing NORAID to list the PIRA as a 'foreign principal'. However, after legal wrangling by NORAID's lawyers, this ruling was reversed in 1984 and the money continued to flow to help the, "poor people of Northern Ireland suffering under British occupation." Critics of NORAID, both in Britain and America, argued as soon as the money faucet was turned back on in 1984, the PIRA's weapons also started to flow again.

One would be oversimplifying the PIRA's North American gunrunning system if they said it consisted of just Harrison, his accomplices, and NORAID. If this was so, then weapons coming into Northern Ireland from the United States would have been shut off with the cases made against Harrison and NORAID. Truth be told, the PIRA had numerous contacts in America, like private citizens of Irish descent and the Irish mob operating out of New York and Boston, that funneled weapons into PIRA supply depots. It has even been said that an employee at Barrett Firearms in Tennessee was a PIRA sympathizer and was responsible for getting several Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifles into the hands of PIRA snipers. Whatever the means employed, the PIRA and their North American supporters were able to purchase thousands of weapons for the PIRA to include Armalite AR-18s, Colt M-16s, Heckler and Koch G3 assault rifles, and various models of civilian sniper and hunting rifles.



Map of Downtown Belfast

Old Mus.
King St
Sq North
Coll.
College
R.U.C. Sta.
College St
Fountain St
Donegall Pla
Donegall St
Castle Pla
Castle La
Callender St
Arthur St
Arthur Sq
Victoria Sq
Telfair St
Court House
R.U.C.
Wellington Pl
Donegall Sq Nth
Chichester St
City Hall
West
East
Queen St
Upr Arthur St
Montgomery St
Gloucester St
Seymour Row
Royal Courts of Justice
Wellington
Murray St
Howard St
Donegall Sq Sth
May St
Lit. May St
Opera Ho.
James St
Bedford St
Linen Hall St
Brunswick St
Adelaide St
Alfred St
Catherine St
Sussex St
Hamilton St
Cromac Sq
Crown
Franklin St
Amelia St
Gt Victoria St
Europa Hotel
Term.
Ulster Hall
Clarence St
Russell St
Henrietta St
Market St
Ch. Bowl
Coll.
RC Ch
BT 2

Notice the complex urban terrain IRA snipers could manipulate to make a shot and then escape.

The Libyan Connection

The PIRA was an organization that did not put all their eggs in one basket, so they looked to others arm suppliers in the international community like Libya. Libya's leader, Kadafi, established connections with the PIRA as early as 1972, which resulted in subsequent transfers of money and weapons to Northern Ireland over the next several decades. Unlike some arms transfers with other countries that could take the form of a dozen weapons here and there, Libya shipped the PIRA quantities of weapons in bulk. Over the course of several arms transfers by the Libyans using commercial shipping vessels, the PIRA smuggled in at least one hundred tons of weapons, explosives, and ammunition.

Through the Libyan connection, the PIRA received hundreds of AK-47 assault rifles, AKM machine guns, DSHK heavy machine guns, SAM-7 anti-aircraft missiles, huge amounts of Semtex plastic explosives, and at least one million rounds of ammunition. PIRA leaders jumped for joy over the size of the successful Libyan arms shipments because they received enough hardware now to sustain their guerrilla movement indefinitely. The PIRA sniper who waited patiently in a building somewhere in Belfast now had a variety of weapons to choose from to conduct their attacks.

While the average PIRA sniper might not be getting world class sniper rifles to shoot their enemies with, the various assault rifles they did get, did the job just fine in the close confines of Northern Ireland's cities. While North America and Libya were the PIRA's biggest suppliers, the PIRA system was more diversified than that. Any country or arms dealer that either needed money or PIRA training or held a grudge against Britain could be a potential source of supply. We know the PIRA was able to receive weapons from several continental European countries like Czechoslovakia, Croatia, and Serbia.

Also, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, a whole new Russian criminal class was available and willing to sell off former Soviet weapons to the PIRA. And those are just the countries that are known. There were many more transactions which British intelligence never learned about. The bottom line was, if the PIRA worked hard enough, they could get weapons into Northern Ireland covertly, despite England's best counter-insurgency efforts. This in itself was a significant logistical feat considering all of the military, intelligence, and law enforcement assets Britain employed in an attempt to strangle the PIRA's weapons lifeline.

Gun Control in Northern Ireland

An important question to ask is why the PIRA went to America and Libya to get guns? Was it really that hard to get them in Northern Ireland itself? The answer is "yes." From early on, the British mainland authorities and the Northern Ireland government understood tight gun control was needed to keep firearms from falling into PIRA hands. Subsequently, several gun control laws were passed in Northern Ireland reflecting the government's desire to tightly regulate firearms. The one gun control law in specific we will focus on is the 65-page Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 (No. 155 (N.I.2)). This gun control law, one of the most restrictive in all of Europe, must be seen for what it was - a reaction to the PIRA's guerrilla war that had been burning hot for more than a decade. The government wanted to be tough on the PIRA and gun control was one way to keep the pressure on them.

Order 1981 stated that anyone who owned, purchased, or possessed a firearm or ammunition had to have a firearm certificate or they would be breaking the law. Additionally, anyone who owned, purchased, or possessed, "any accessory to any such weapon designed or adapted to diminish the noise or flash caused by firing the weapon" – in other words a flash or sound suppressor - must also have a certificate for that device or they would be breaking the law. Both shotguns and high-velocity air rifles were recognized as requiring a firearms certificate. Only recognized, licensed firearms dealers could buy, sell, trade, and repair firearms. Sales or transfers between two private citizens were illegal.

Fully automatic firearms were illegal as were any semi-automatic or pump-action firearms other than .22 caliber rimfire weapons. Any exceptions must be approved by the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State also reserved the right to prohibit the transfer of firearms or ammunition from one place to another in Northern Ireland, to prohibit a transfer of these items from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, and to prohibit these items from being exported out of Northern Ireland itself.

Armalite AR-18 Assault Rifle

This is the infamous Armalite, the first modern assault rifle the IRA received in large quantities. The folding stock enabled the AR-18 to be easily hidden and its supersonic 5.56 mm round was very accurate. The AR-18 was referred to in the IRA's notorious "The Armalite and The Ballot Box" slogan, meaning the IRA would simultaneously pursue a military and a political campaign.

Firearms dealers could sell legal weapons to private citizens, but the dealers had to report these transactions to the police and the dealers had to show they had taken the appropriate measures to ensure the true identity of the purchaser. The dealer also had to keep a record of all their transactions for the last ten years so police could check their records. Also, any gunsmithing done with a weapon, like alterations or repairs, had to be reported to the police within 48 hours. If a dealer failed to abide by these regulations, they were committing a crime. There were some loopholes in the firearms certificate process, but they were microscopic.

For instance, a citizen with no firearms certificate could possess a firearm licensed in someone else's name, but only if they were transporting the weapon for that person and it was for sporting purposes only. A citizen could have in their possession an unlicensed firearm if they were the member of a recognized shooting club and they were involved in target practice. And a citizen could possess an unlicensed low-velocity air gun if they were shooting at an established range. If a citizen did legally purchase and possess a firearm, they still had to use it in a lawful manner. Legally carrying a weapon, but with the intent to commit a criminal action, was a crime.

As intended by the government, the various legal offences started to stack up if one was in possession of an illegal firearm. For example, trespassing with a weapon was illegal (such as PIRA members conducting home invasions), firing weapons in a public place or road was illegal (like PIRA snipers firing in urban environments), and anyone who spent three years in prison (like the hundreds of PIRA members who cycled through the legal system) could not legally own a firearm.

When applying for a firearms certificate, the government ensured they knew exactly who they were giving a weapon to. The applicant had to provide up to four pictures of themselves and providing false information on the certificate (like PIRA members using fake identification cards) was a crime. Plus, the person applying for the firearms certificate had to prove to the police they had a good reason for wanting to possess a firearm. Once a citizen had a firearm certificate, which was valid for three years, it could be revoked at any time by the police if that person was deemed a threat to public safety. So, if a citizen acquired a legal, licensed weapon and then joined the PIRA, their firearm certificate would be revoked as soon as the police found out about their affiliation with that illegal organization.

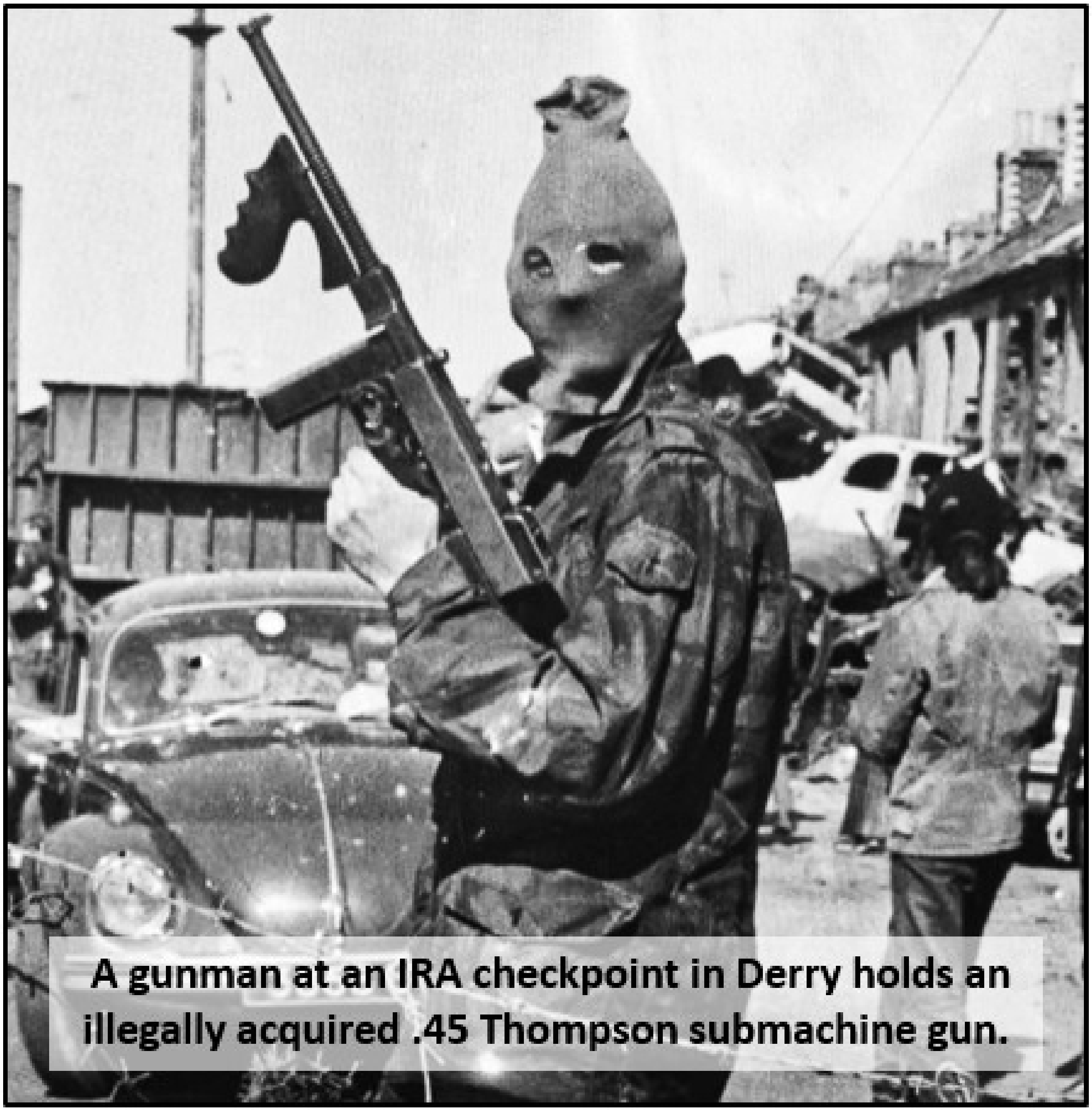
The police had wide authority to enforce Order 1981 and judges could issue warrants authorizing police to enter and search any private residence or premise to search for and seize firearms. The police could also conduct these searches in order to inspect the records of gun dealers. On the streets, the police had the authority under “reasonable cause” to question and search any person who was suspected of carrying a firearm. As a result, any PIRA member looking suspicious or unnatural during an operation was inviting themselves to be searched and questioned. Since the authorities placed such a strong emphasis on forensic science, citizens, when asked in writing by the police, had to submit their firearms for ballistics testing. This allowed the police to compare the ballistics of any given firearm with that of incriminating bullets found at a crime scene fired by a PIRA gunman.

Punishments for violating these gun laws varied. If a PIRA member was caught in possession of unregistered ammunition, they could receive a five-year prison sentence. If a PIRA member was caught in possession of an unregistered handgun, they faced a ten-year prison sentence. For example, Irish National Liberation Army member

Christopher McWilliams - who would later gain notoriety as the trigger man who killed Protestant paramilitary leader Billy Wright - was once arrested for illegal possession of a handgun with intent to cause injury and was given a fourteen-year jail sentence.

And if, let us say, a PIRA sniper was caught in possession of a rifle and was determined to be using said rifle for criminal intent, such as shooting a British soldier, the sniper could face life in prison. Violations of many of these gun laws demanded a minimum, automatic five-year prison sentence to deter anyone from breaking the law in the first place. The authorities did not want some slick-talking lawyer in the pay of the PIRA's political arm, Sinn Fein, to come in and get a PIRA gunman off the hook through tricky legalese (although this still happened). The government wanted PIRA members to do hard time before seeing the light of day.

Even with these strict gun laws, many citizens did apply for and receive firearm certificates. This was possible since a person could state "personal protection" as a legitimate reason for requesting legal ownership of a firearm. This opened the door for Protestants to argue they felt threatened by the PIRA so they could get a gun. One statistic for 1996 showed 10,867 firearms certificates were issued in Northern Ireland for the purpose of personal protection. Another record said approximately 90,000 firearm certificates, for all reasons, not just personal protection, were issued in Northern Ireland.



A gunman at an IRA checkpoint in Derry holds an illegally acquired .45 Thompson submachine gun.

True, a person could legally get a hunting rifle that could be used for sniping, but the authorities would know who sold it, who bought it, when the transaction took place, and where the present owner lived. Furthermore, the police could order the owner to provide a ballistic test of their weapon at any time. While a rifle could be legally purchased, the laws made it extremely difficult for it to be used in an illegal manner and have the owner get away with it. The laws were so restrictive with such strict penalties the PIRA was forced to go overseas for their weapons. In this respect, the government's gun laws inside Northern Ireland were effective. However, by going outside the country, the PIRA bypassed the British authorities’ entire system of gun control.

IRA Sniper Tactics

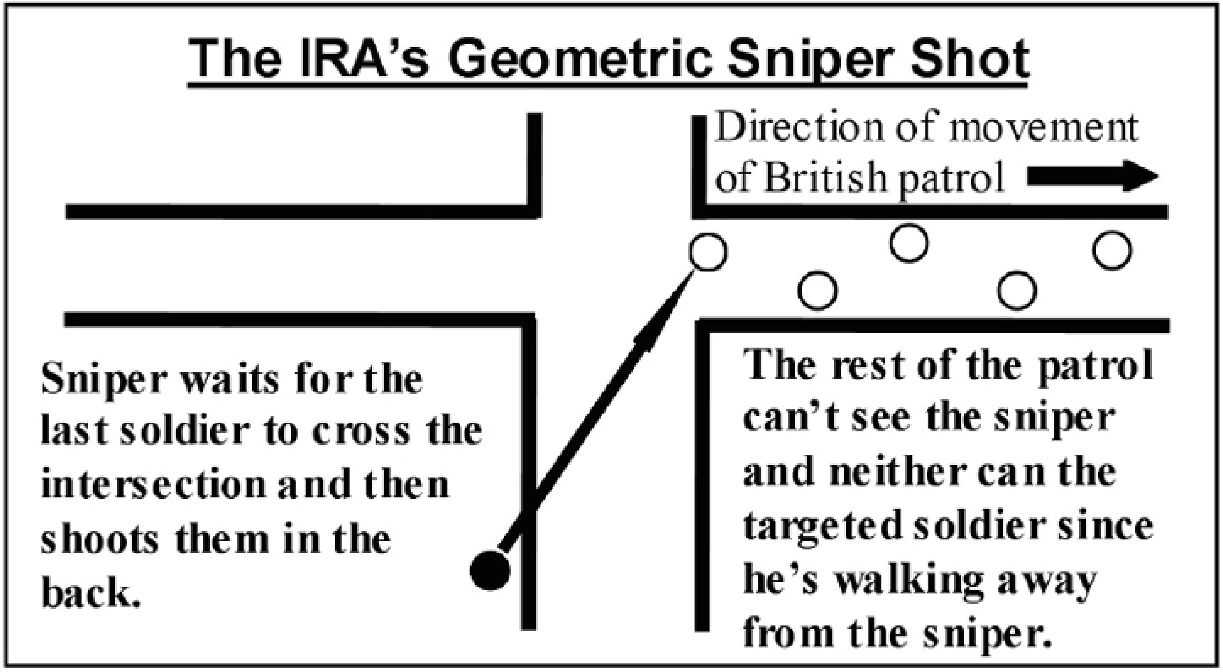
As the war progressed from 1969 onwards, the PIRA modified its sniper tactics to meet the changing situation on the ground. Initially, PIRA snipers could get away with relatively unsophisticated tactics since the British and RUC were inexperienced in modern urban guerrilla warfare. Any British soldier or RUC officer wearing a uniform was a target waiting to get hit since they did not blend in with the local populace and openly patrolled the streets and neighborhoods to enforce law and order. These soldiers and officers walking patrols on the streets became favorite targets. Since walking a beat set a pattern, PIRA snipers studied their habits and ambushed them as they made their rounds. Even soldiers and officers driving in the back of open vehicles were targeted, as were those riding inside armored vehicles with open hatches and doors.

Whenever possible, PIRA snipers targeted these patrols as they passed through an intersection. While in an intersection, a shot could be made from all four directions. Consequently, the patrol had a lot of possible sniper positions to look for and they could not cover them all. As the patrol moved through the intersection, the PIRA shooters preferred to target the last person in the patrol. This way, the rest of the patrol was already past the open area and moving down the street. When the last man in the patrol was shot, the other members could not see the sniper and thus could not respond effectively. All they could do was grab their wounded comrade and drag them to cover while the sniper made their getaway.

The urban areas the PIRA snipers worked in allowed them to manipulate the streets and buildings in other ways. For instance, as a British patrol passed an intersection, a PIRA sniper would fire from down a street, from a door opened slightly. Since the sniper was firing at an angle, from a row of connected residences, the targeted patrol had no idea which specific residence the shot came from. As the patrol tried to figure out where the shot came from, the sniper would close the door, lock it, stash the weapon and then walk out the back of the building free of incriminating evidence. To the soldiers looking for the sniper, the row of buildings used by the sniper formed a visual and physical barrier allowing the shooter to make a getaway.

Soldiers and officers providing security at checkpoints and installations were also inviting targets. This meant any soldier or officer checking licenses at a roadside checkpoint, directing traffic at a busy intersection, or inspecting purses at the entrance to a courthouse were targets. To target these stationary men, PIRA snipers had to maneuver within shooting distance to take a shot, while remaining undetected. This required more skill and gave British counter-sniper measures a better chance to work. But the complex urban environment still gave the prepared sniper the upper hand.

The PIRA resorted to all sorts of tricks or "come-ons" to get a British soldier or RUC officer in their sights. Police officers trying to control groups of rioting people made a good target for a PIRA sniper hidden somewhere in the city. Soldiers providing security for bomb disposal specialists checking out a reported car bomb (called in by the sniper's crew) were targets. Any soldier or officer responding to any sort of incident like a robbery, IED, or car bomb did so with the realization they might be walking into an intentional trap meant to place them under the crosshairs of a waiting PIRA sniper.


The IRA's Geometric Sniper Shot

Sniper waits for the last soldier to cross the intersection and then shoots them in the back.

The rest of the patrol can't see the sniper and neither can the targeted soldier since he's walking away from the sniper.

In the cities, PIRA snipers had a variety of shooting platforms to choose from. A favorite choice was anything that was community property to include churches, apartment buildings, and businesses. Community property was preferable because no individual owned it and thus no one could be charged with a crime for letting the PIRA snipers use it. Another good choice for a PIRA sniper was an abandoned house or building. Again, no individual owned these buildings and because they were unoccupied, there was no one present to identify the PIRA snipers and give sworn testimony to the police after a shooting. Many a soldier and officer would have preferred these abandoned buildings to be razed to the grown to prevent their use by PIRA shootists, but because of the environment they operated in, this was politically unacceptable.

The PIRA also made use of home invasions when it was required to take a shot at the enemy. For example, in early 1993, a PIRA hit team tried to assassinate Johnny “Mad Dog” Adair - the ruthless leader of the Protestant Loyalist Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) - by means of a home invasion. The team knew where Adair lived so they planned to gun him down as he left his residence. The team hijacked a car and entered a home across the street from where Adair lived. A two-man security team stayed on the bottom floor while the shooter went upstairs and took aim out of a window with a rifle. The sniper team stayed in position for several hours, hoping to put a bullet into Adair but he never showed up and they called the operation off

The home invasion had some complications because it required a small team to break into the house and possibly control a family. The sniper team, once in the home, had to be well trained in order not to leave behind any incriminating evidence like fingerprints or trace fibers. Plus, since they were in close proximity to the family, the family may be able to identify them at a later date from their voices, accents, or mannerisms. To complicate matters further, what about random phone calls, bathroom breaks, friends and family coming over unannounced to visit, or nosy neighbors? As far as one can tell, the PIRA pioneered the method of conducting sniper attacks in an urban environment while hidden inside a vehicle. One PIRA sniper crew first used this method in the late 1970’s while working in Belfast. For some reason, this method was not picked up by the rest of the PIRA and it was not until the 1990s that it was used again by a PIRA sniper crew working in South Armagh.

The Goldfinger Sniper Crew

Without doubt, the most notorious PIRA sniper team was the Goldfinger crew working out of the PIRA stronghold of South Armagh. The Goldfinger crew (Goldfinger was their code name) brought back the earlier PIRA tactic of shooting from inside a car. Shooting from a car gave them good concealment for their attack, provided them a mobile platform that was also their means of escape, and allowed them to put miles between them and the place of the attack in minutes.

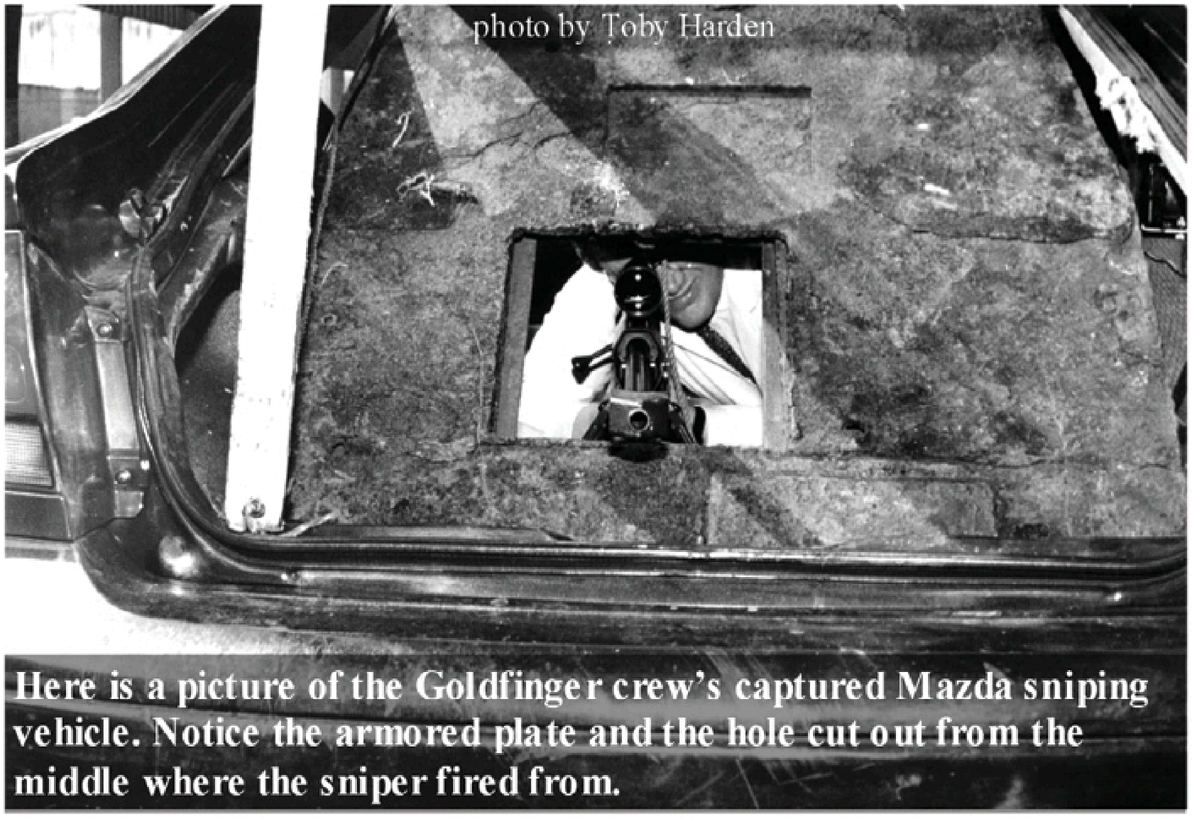
The Goldfinger sniper crew were a seasoned lot and developed a successful guerrilla sniping methodology. They used a Mazda 626 hatchback as a shooting platform and installed a bulletproof metal shield in the back. A one-foot by one-foot shooting port was cut in the middle of the armor. The idea was the shooter, later identified as Michael Caraher, would fire through the port in the armor, then release a sliding armored door that covered the opening. So, as the Goldfinger crew drove off, any incoming enemy fire would strike the metal plate, protecting them until they escaped. The Goldfinger crew consisted of a driver, the shooter, and a man riding shotgun in the passenger seat, armed with an assault rifle. They all wore balaclavas to protect their identity and the shooter wore hearing protection so he would not be deafened from the blast of the Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifle he was firing.

On February 12, 1997, the Goldfinger crew targeted a vehicle checkpoint in Bessbrook Mill on Green Road for attack. They studied the terrain, the checkpoint itself, and came up with a plan of attack. On that morning, the three-man sniper team approached the checkpoint and parked the Mazda 626 near a concrete bus shelter about 120 yards away. The rear of the Mazda faced the checkpoint. The passenger riding shotgun lifted the rear hatch of the car and propped it open with a piece of wood so the shooter, Michael Caraher, had a clear shot through the armored firing port. Caraher got into position behind the big Barrett rifle and took aim at the checkpoint. But he could not get a good bead on a target because the British soldiers were hidden behind the corrugated steel of the guard shack. What the Goldfinger crew needed was some sort of bait so a soldier would expose themselves.

This live bait took the form of Mrs. Lorrain McElroy as she approached the checkpoint in her car. When she got close to the guard shack, British soldier Lance Bombardier Stephen Restorick asked her to stop so he could check her identification. However, the young soldier had to step out from the protection of the guard shack and into the open to check Mrs. McElroy's driver license. This was all Caraher needed. He took aim through his scope, sighted in on Restorick, and squeezed the trigger. The massive .50 caliber bullet left the Barrett's muzzle traveling 2800 feet per second and struck Restorick's bullpup assault rifle. The fast-moving bullet fragmented upon impact, sending a piece of metal through Restorick's buttocks and out the side of his body. A piece of the gunsight unpredictably careened into the car, gashing Mrs. McElroy in the forehead.

As Restorick crumpled to the ground, Caraher pulled on a cord attached to the block of wood propping the rear hatch open. The hatch dropped shut and the driver took off at a high rate of speed. As Caraher and crew sped away from the checkpoint, another PIRA car scouted the way ahead, ensuring the sniper team would not drive blindly into a British quick reaction force or a hasty checkpoint. The PIRA scout car led them to a rock quarry where other PIRA members were already waiting. The sniper team dropped off their weapons and car, which were in turn spirited away to a hiding place. Caraher's team was taken to a safe-house where they immediately began their counter-forensics procedures, showering to wash off any gunpowder residue and placing their clothes in a bag to burned.

Unfortunately for Stephen Restorick, he was the last British soldier to be killed before the 1997 cease fire agreement and the ninth victim of Caraher and his crew. Only two months after this deadly attack, the Goldfinger sniper crew, to include Michael Caraher, were arrested and their Barrett .50 caliber rifle seized. Caraher was later tried and convicted, receiving multiple life sentences and a 105-year prison term. The dismantling of the deadly Goldfinger sniper crew brought a sigh of relief to the soldiers and officers who continued working in South Armagh. While the capture and imprisonment of Caraher and his crew should have been heralded as a counter-insurgency victory, some troubling rumors began to surface.



Goldfinger’s Sniper Platform

photo by Toby Harden

Here is a picture of the Goldfinger crew’s captured Mazda sniping vehicle. Notice the armored plate and the hole cut out from the middle where the sniper fired from.

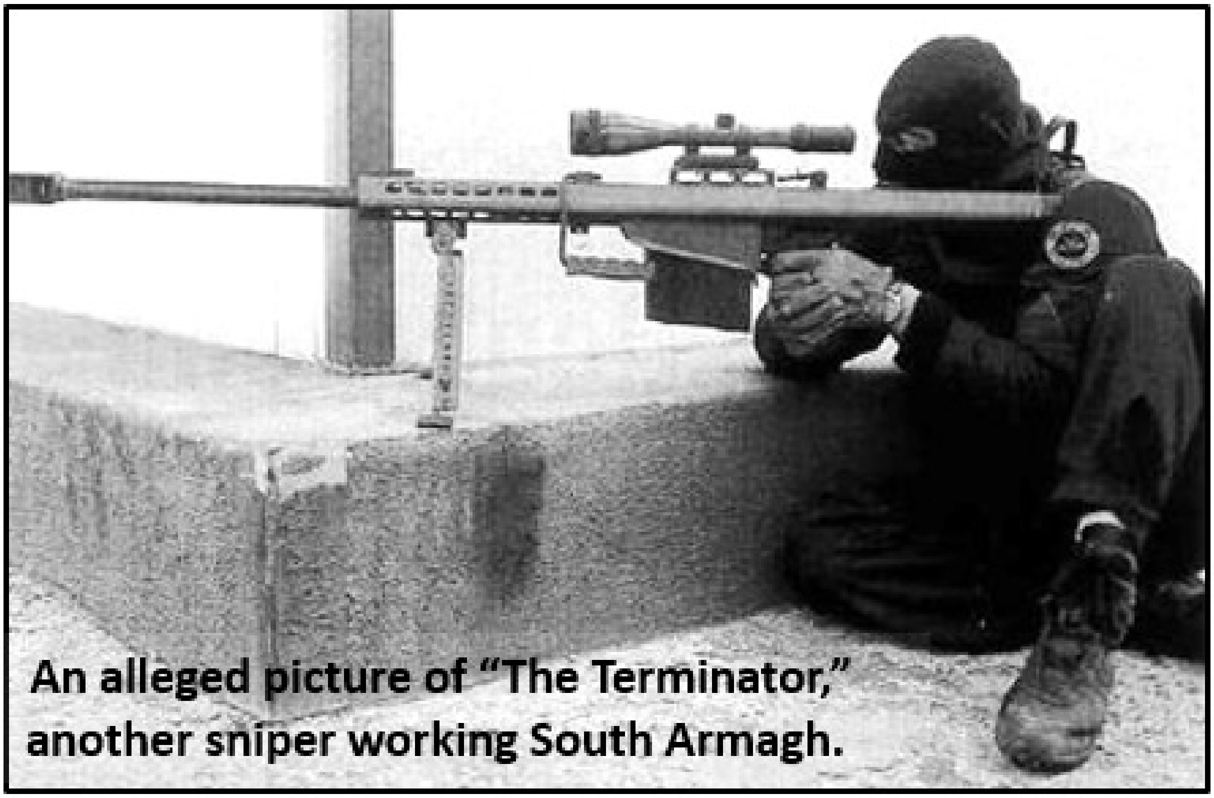
But what kind of rumors could sour such a clear success? After all, a skilled sniper and hardened killer was brought to justice and would rot to death in a cold British prison. The evidence against Caraher was overwhelming and he had no hope of beating the system. The British authorities conducted a thorough investigation, resulting in an overwhelming mountain of incriminating physical and forensic evidence. Case closed. However, the case seemed too solid, almost like there was someone on the inside who already knew about the Goldfinger crew and their activities and tipped off the authorities.

These rumors appeared to be confirmed when the Sunday Times ran an article about Restorick on June 20, 2004, entitled, “Last British soldier murdered by IRA ‘sacrificed” for a spy.’” The Restorick family, who suffered the painful loss of their son, wanted some answers. Were the rumors true? Did the British have an informant on the inside who knew about the sniper attacks? Is it true the authorities knew the Goldfinger crew was planning an attack, but did nothing to warn the troops on the ground because the military did not want to burn their source? Was, in fact, Restorick sacrificed, used as live bait, to build a bigger case against the Goldfinger crew and to learn more about the PIRA structure in South Armagh?

After reading the article, the Restorick family made an official complaint against the Northern Ireland government and demanded answers about their son's death. In their official complaint, they cited damning statements from the article in the Sunday Times. The disturbing evidence of a cover up by British authorities included the following taken from the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland December 13, 2006, report:

- 1969: No recorded sniper deaths of 3 total deaths. Start of PIRA campaign.
- 1970: No recorded sniper deaths of 17 total deaths.
- 1971: 24 sniper deaths of 98 total deaths. 24% of total.
- 1972: 50 sniper deaths of 267 total deaths. 19% of total.
- 1973: 28 sniper deaths of 132 total deaths. 21% of total.
- 1974: 21 sniper deaths of 148 total deaths. 14% of total.
- 1975: 7 sniper deaths of 125 total deaths. 6% of total.
- 1976: 12 sniper deaths of 154 total deaths. 8% of total.
- 1977: 14 sniper deaths of 75 total deaths. 19% of total.
- 1978: 7 sniper deaths of 61 total deaths. 11% of total.
- 1979: 11 sniper deaths of 102 total deaths. 11% of total.
- 1980: 5 sniper deaths of 51 total deaths. 10% of total.
- 1981: 7 sniper deaths of 70 total deaths. 10% of total.
- 1982: 5 sniper deaths of 83 total deaths. 6% of total.
- 1983: No recorded sniper deaths of 61 total deaths.
- 1984: 4 sniper deaths of 48 total deaths. 8% of total.
- 1985: 1 sniper death of 48 total deaths. 2% of total.
- 1986: No recorded sniper deaths of 40 total deaths.
- 1987: 2 sniper deaths of 71 total deaths. 3% of total.
- 1988: 5 sniper deaths of 70 total deaths. 7% of total.
- 1989: 1 sniper death of 54 total deaths. 2% of total.
- 1990: 2 sniper deaths of 52 total deaths. 4% of total.
- 1991: No recorded sniper deaths of 50 total deaths.
- 1992: 4 sniper deaths of 40 total deaths. 10% of total.

- 1993: 7 sniper deaths of 38 total deaths. 18% of total.
- 1994: No recorded sniper deaths of 25 total deaths. Temporary cease fire.
- 1995: 1 sniper death of 7 total deaths. 14% of total.
- 1996: No recorded sniper deaths of 13 total deaths.
- 1997: 1 sniper death out of 5 total deaths. 20% of total.
- 1998: No sniper deaths of 36 total deaths. Good Friday Peace Accords.
- 1999-2001: No recorded sniper deaths of 12 total deaths.



An alleged picture of "The Terminator," another sniper working South Armagh.

These statistics reveal the PIRA used sniping as just one part of a larger guerrilla campaign. Most killings were accomplished through IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), car bombs, drive-bys, and close-in assassinations. These statistics also reflect the fact that over time, sniping became less feasible for the PIRA because of the government's counter-sniper measures. From 1971-1974, the PIRA conducted more than half of their lethal sniper attacks, killing 124 people. Over the next twenty-five years, the PIRA killed less than 100 people in sniper attacks. The British military and RUC learned from their early years and changed their tactics. British soldiers stopped standing at unprotected checkpoints and began observing the terrain in sniper-proof guard towers. Soldiers stopped walking from one point to another and started traveling in armored cars. Or patrols were ferried from one point to another in helicopters. Soldiers began wearing modern body armor and using more effective tactics when on foot patrol. Also, the government's forensic onslaught made sniper attacks more difficult from a counter-forensics viewpoint. As a result, it was easier for the PIRA to blow up an enemy patrol by a remote control bomb than it was to shoot them in person.

Another reason for the decrease in PIRA sniper attacks was the government's own increasingly aggressive use of snipers. As British patrols moved in Northern Ireland's cities, they were regularly covered by static sniper teams on the lookout for PIRA snipers. During large rallies and rioting, counter-sniper teams provided overwatch for their fellow soldiers and police who were actually down at street level battling it out with the brick throwing crowds. While the PIRA snipers employed many clever tactics, sometimes their enemy's counter-sniper tactics were better. When this was the case, the PIRA paid the price. Sutton's research reveals at least seven PIRA sniper team members were killed during their operations:

IRA gunmen with an AR-18, pistol and hand grenade wear gloves and ski masks to protect their identities.

- On September 29, 1972, James Quigley of the PIRA was killed by the British Army. He was shot during an attempted sniper attack on a British Army foot patrol on Albert Street, Lower Falls, Belfast.
- On December 27, 1972, Eugene Devlin of the PIRA was killed by the British Army. He was shot during an attempted sniper attack on a British Army patrol on Townsend Street, Strabane, County Tyrone
- On May 18, 1973, Sean McKee, of the PIRA was killed by the British Army. He was shot during an attempted sniper attack on a British Army foot patrol on Fairfield Street, Ardoyne, Belfast.
- On April 17, 1977, Trevor McKibben of the PIRA was killed by the British Army. He was shot while carrying a rifle on Flax Street, Ardoyne, Belfast.
- On February 22, 1986, Anthony Gough, of the PIRA was killed by the British Army. He was shot after being involved in a sniper attack on the Fort George British Army base, Derry.

- On September 14, 1986, James McKernan of the PIRA was killed by the British Army. He was shot after being involved in a sniper attack on a British Army foot patrol on Andersonstown Road, Belfast
- On March 14, 1988, Kevin McCracken of the PIRA was killed by the British Army. He was shot during an attempted sniper attack on a British Army foot patrol on Norglen Crescent, Turf Lodge, Belfast.

PIRA Sniping and the Troubles

While the sniper deaths inflicted by the PIRA are revealing, they do not tell the whole story. Far more people than the 218 deaths listed in Sutton's study were wounded in sniper attacks but survived. An estimated five times the number of dead were also wounded by PIRA snipers for an additional 1090 casualties. Some victims were shot in the legs or arms and survived. Others were saved by body armor and helmets. Some received grievous wounds but were saved by battlefield medics and emergency room teams who became trauma wizards after decades of treating gunshot wounds.

No one knows exactly how many people were shot by PIRA snipers, as these statistics were never recorded, drowned out somewhere in the more than 37,000 separate shooting incidents that took place over the course of The Troubles. Additionally, more than 2000 killings out of a total of 3700 deaths have gone unsolved. A number of these victims may have been shot by snipers, but we will never know. This is a testament to the counter-forensic prowess of the Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries who became experts at getting away with murder.

The PIRA's sniping campaign showed real tactical innovation as far as the art of urban guerrilla sniping is concerned. The PIRA was the first guerrilla movement on record to employ a vehicle as a sniper platform. They were the first movement to successfully employ heavy caliber rifles in a sustained sniper campaign. They were the first movement to recognize the threat of forensic investigation and then employ disciplined counter-forensic methods during their sniper operations. Also, the PIRA was able to continually supply its snipers with weapons despite some of the most restrictive gun laws in the world and despite being physically isolated by virtue of Northern Ireland being part of an island. Fortunately, for the soldiers, police, and citizens of Northern Ireland, the 1998 Good Friday Peace Accords have taken root and have silenced the PIRA’s sniper campaign for the foreseeable future.

Chapter 16

Fry the Brain

If you run, you hit the bullet. If you walk, the bullet hits you.

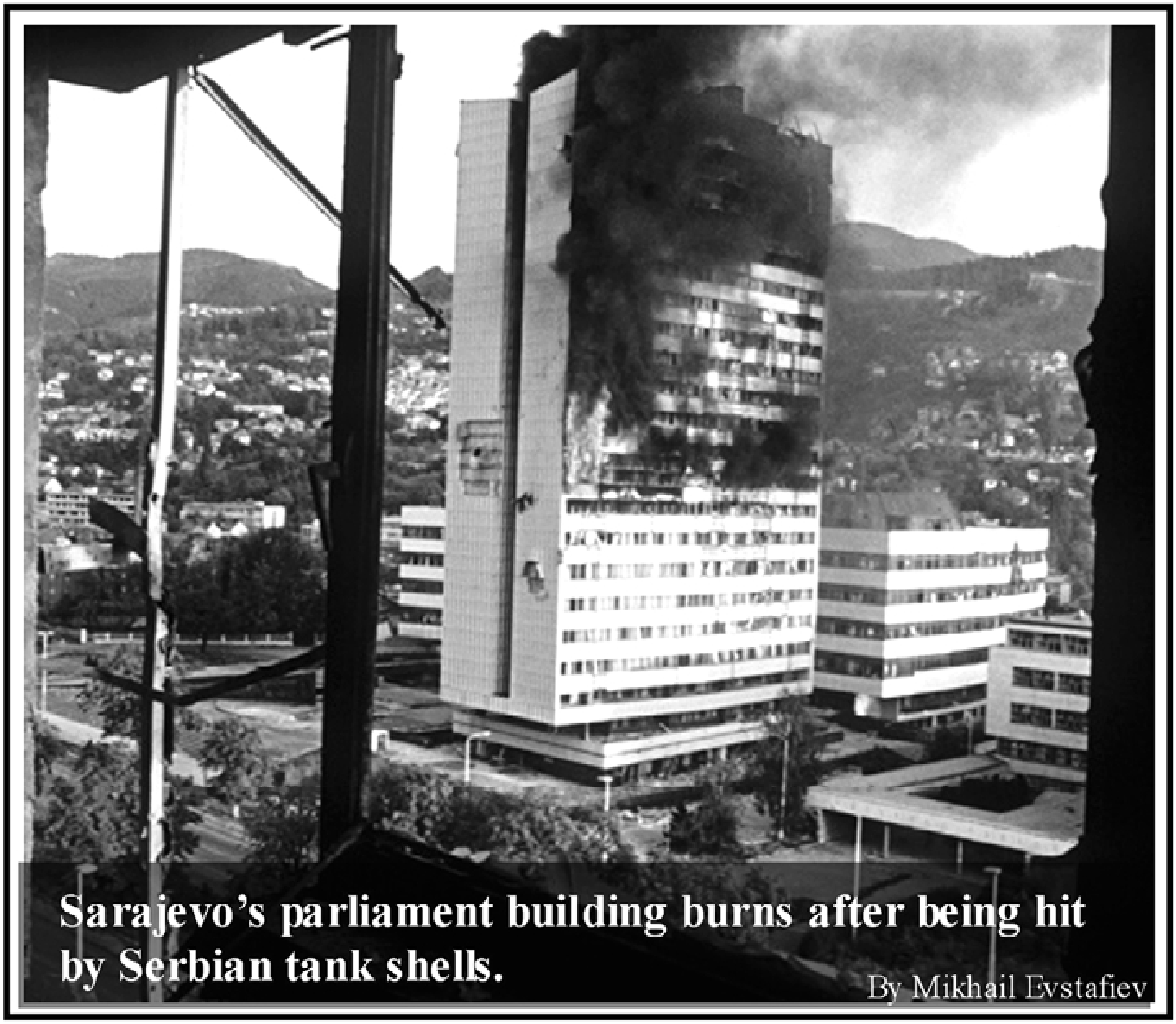
- Sarajevo conventional wisdom

The Descent into Madness

Sarajevo is a beautiful city, built centuries ago by the once powerful Ottoman Empire. Even after the Ottomans collapsed, the city remained and thrived with a vibrant, tolerant, multi-ethnic, multi-religious population that included Muslims, Jews, Croats, and Serbs. Sarajevo, located in the heart of Bosnia, was a true cultural kaleidoscope where East met West and merged into something that was a little bit of both. In 1984, when the Winter Olympics were held in Sarajevo, the world saw first-hand the city's beauty – its hand crafted churches and mosques, the colorful orange roofs of its quaint residences, and the beautiful snow-capped mountains. If, during these splendid Olympics, you approached a resident of Sarajevo and said eight years later they would wake every morning to the echo of gunshots they would have called you crazy.

Even fewer people in 1986 would have predicted Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of glasnost (political openness) and perestroika (economic restructuring) would lead to genocide in the ethnic and religious patchwork called Yugoslavia. However, Gorbachev's attempt to make the Soviet Union stronger economically, and less threatening politically, led to an explosion of nationalism that burst across Eastern Europe like a hand grenade. Only three years later, in 1989, the Kremlin rejected the Brezhnev Doctrine, meaning Russia would no longer interfere in the internal political affairs of its Warsaw Pact satellites. This begged a most serious question: if the regimes of the old Iron Curtain no longer had Moscow's support, what was to stop the local populations from throwing their repressive communist governments into the dustbin of history? The powder keg was lit.

Soon, an irresistible revolutionary wave crashed down on the Soviet Union’s former allies, bringing down government after government, in country after country, like dominoes: East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia all rejected their communist systems. Yugoslavia, too, was hit by this wave as its own states vied for independence from the Serb-dominated, Belgrade-centered government. On June 25, 1991, Yugoslavia’s western-most territory, Slovenia, rolled the military and political dice and declared its independence from Belgrade. After a brief ten-day war, with very few casualties, Slovenia was free. This quick road to nationhood was due mostly to the fact few Serbs lived in Slovenia. Serbia’s leader, Slobodon Milosevic, calculated he could not muster the support to fight a civil war where there were no Serbs to “protect.” To Slovenia’s neighbor, Croatia, the road to independence appeared easy, almost costless. A dangerous precedent had been set because Croatia too thirsted for independence.



Sarajevo's parliament building burns after being hit by Serbian tank shells.

By Mikhail Evstafiev

On June 25, Croatia also declared its independence. However, unlike Slovenia, Croatia agreed to defer their independence. It would be several months before Serbs and Croats started killing each other with gusto. But, by the end of 1991, the war was in full swing as Croatia found itself locked in brutal fighting against its minority Serb population, which was backed by Belgrade and its army, the JNA. The fighting between Croatia and the Serbs echoed loudly throughout the rest of former Yugoslavia and into neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnia-Herzegovina, a mish-mash of Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, and Muslim Bosnians, quickly disintegrated when its Croatian and Serbian minorities declared their own sub-states. Full blown war finally came to Bosnia-Herzegovina after it declared independence from Belgrade in March 1992.

The Serbian Siege of Sarajevo

The Bosnian government tried to navigate the perilous road to independence while avoiding a crippling war and failed. Because, as the Bosnian government performed their delicate political balancing act, the Bosnian Serbs were moving in weapons, heavy artillery, and supplies. When Bosnia-Herzegovina declared its independence, the Bosnian Serb Army (BSA) was ready, attacking along a broad front, gobbling up vast tracts of territory as they 'cleansed' the country of Muslims. The capital of Bosnia- Herzegovina, Sarajevo, was caught up in this cyclone of war when the BSA tried to overrun it in a tank-led assault. The Sarajevans found themselves unprepared, caught in a war they did not want, with few supplies, few heavy weapons, and nothing more than undisciplined gaggles of hastily raised militia for protection. But, this proved to be enough, because Sarajevo's complex urban terrain lent itself to the defense. The Serbian assault was stopped cold. What began as a lightning attack to steamroll the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina ground to a sudden standstill and was transformed into the longest siege in modern military history.

While the surrounding BSA forces were well armed with heavy artillery, mortars, and tanks, they had relatively weak infantry forces – they only had 13,000 troops committed to the siege. In contrast, the Bosnian forces trapped in the city, while suffering from a lack of heavy weapons, had 30,000 soldiers, militiamen, and volunteers under arms. It was this superiority in foot soldiers that proved to be the trump card. Both sides eventually realized infantry was the key factor in their urban combat and the Bosnians, with more boots on the ground, were able to hold off the firepower-dependent Serbs in spite of their own dearth of weapons. Since the Serbs could not storm Sarajevo by force, they settled for surrounding the city, where the entrapped population would be brought to its collective knees the old fashioned way: through starvation, hardship, and terror. This was a strategy the Serbs referred to as 'Fry the Brain' where the people of Sarajevo would be hammered incessantly with such a stupefying stream of endless terror and random death they would stop thinking rationally, stop defending their city, and just give in to the Serbs' demands.

From April 1992 until February 1996 (the Dayton Peace Accords were signed in December 1995, but the Serbs only pulled out several months later) the people of Sarajevo suffered from a murderous barrage of high-explosive shells fired from Serbian artillery, rockets, mortars, and tanks. Almost every building in the city suffered some degree of damage and thousands of structures were completely destroyed. By the end of the siege, almost forty percent of Sarajevo’s pre-war population of half a million people were killed, ethnically-cleansed, or fled in terror. As in other urban wars, the Serbian forces found the sniper could play a vital role in their plans.

“Watch out Sniper” warns local residents in Sarajevo.

PAZI SNAJPER

The Serbian Sniper Campaign

Saying the Serbs valued the urban sniper is a gross understatement and does not do the Serbian sniper effort justice. A more accurate statement would be from 1992 to 1996, Serbian forces embarked on the longest, sustained, urban sniping campaign in the history of warfare. For 1,395 days Serbian forces directed a deliberate campaign of terror against the Sarajevans of all walks of life. Serbian sniper policy dictated their snipers shoot anything that moved – military or civilian, men or women, children or adults. To be a Sarajevan was to be marked for death.

The Serbs’ sniper campaign served several purposes. First, the random killing of everyone and anyone sought to disrupt daily life in Sarajevo. No one was safe from the Serbian shooters and anyone could find themselves under fire from an unseen gunman hidden skillfully in one of the surrounding picturesque neighborhoods. The Serbian snipers hoped to cause utter chaos in the city, making the Bosnian government's attempts to defend the city impossible. Governing Sarajevo was indeed difficult since public employees were often the first ones to take a bullet. Policemen could not openly walk the streets, public transportation was paralyzed, and firemen were shot as they tried to put out fires. The garbage piled up because the sanitation workers were picked off. Serbian snipers even gunned down Sarajevo's zookeepers.

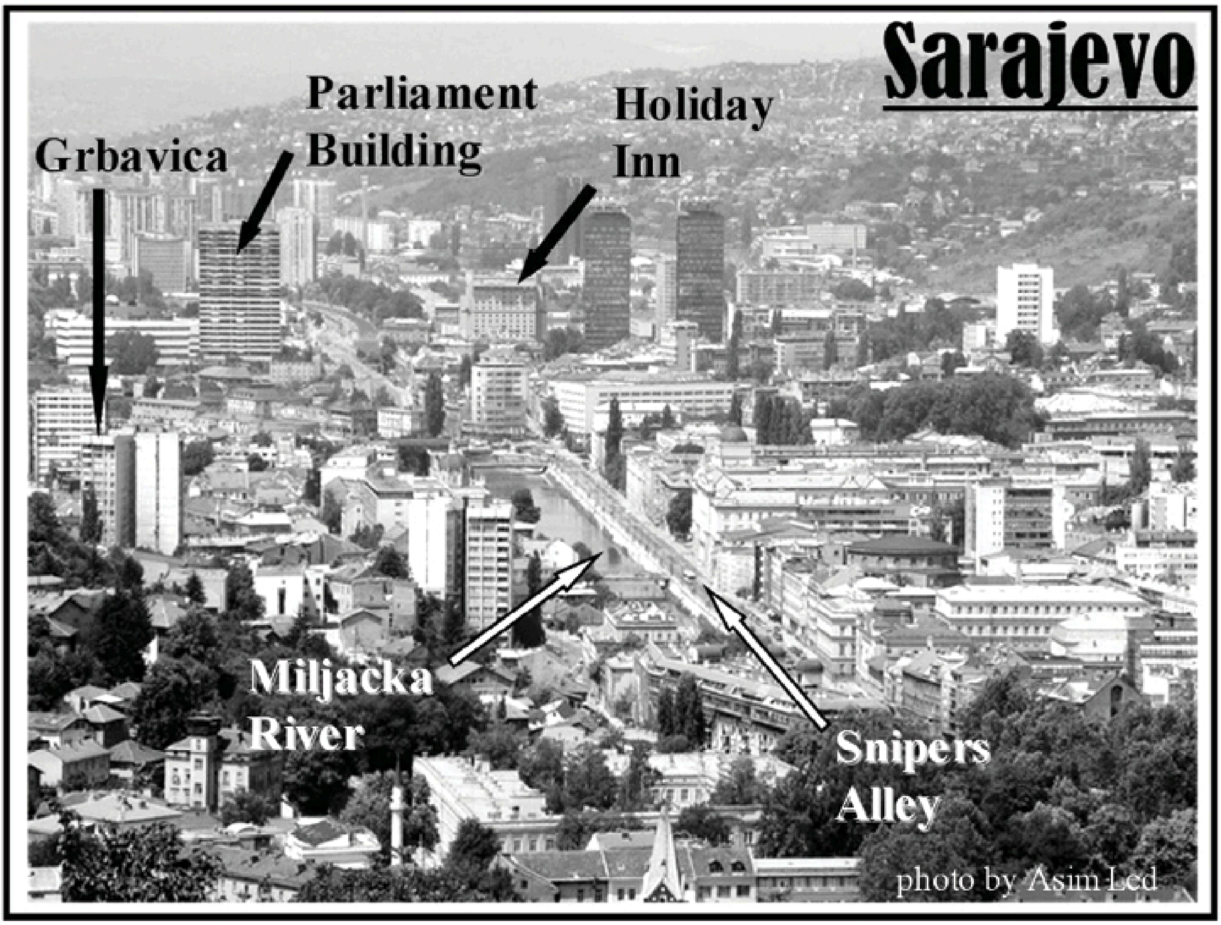
The Serbs goal was to instill widespread public terror, i.e., to fry the brain. Since the majority of Sarajevans trapped in the city were non-Serbs, the attacking Serbs also used their sniper campaign as an ethnic-cleansing tool. The Serbs calculated large numbers of fearful, non-Serbian refugees would be inclined to evacuate the city rather than stay and be shot or blown up. Even though Sarajevo was besieged, people still managed to smuggle or bribe themselves out of the Serbian ring or get flown out by the United Nation forces securing Sarajevo's airport. As an added bonus, any non-Serb killed from the barrel of a Serbian rifle served to reduce the population of rival ethnic groups. Either way, a reduction of the non-Serb populace through death or forced migration was a step in the right direction for the attacking Serbs. Judging by the 100,000-plus civilians that fled Sarajevo, the Serbs' calculations were partially correct.

Furthermore, the Serbs used their sniper campaign as a means to pressure the government of Bosnia-Herzegovina into meeting their political demands. In this sense, the tortured city of Sarajevo was held hostage by the encircling Serbs. Every day the Serbs picked off more and more of the hard pressed Sarajevans, the Bosnian government could blame themselves for the carnage. If the Bosnian government wanted to stop the butchery, all they had to do was surrender and the killing would stop. Additionally, if the Sarajevans wanted to come to their senses and save themselves from further bloodshed, all they had to do was pressure their own government into giving up. The Serbs were saying see, it's not our fault we are shooting you; it's your fault we are shooting you.

Sniper's Alley

One of the city's prime killing fields and where one's brain may get fried was the east-west running main boulevard in downtown Sarajevo, dubbed "Sniper's Alley" by its residents. This boulevard had wide, two-way streets and connected the newer industrial portion of the city with the older historic section. The southern edge of the boulevard was widened further by the tram tracks used before the siege for public transportation. Sniper's Alley became even more exposed after Sarajevans, who were desperate for firewood in the cold winter months, cut down the surrounding trees. Another open area, the ancient waters of the Miljacka River, bordered Sniper's Alley to the south, just a pistol shot away. It was from the far side of the Miljacka that the Serbian snipers had scores of excellent urban sniper positions to shoot from, including towering, concrete, multi-story apartment buildings.

Although Sarajevans quickly learned to avoid unnecessary movement along Sniper's Alley, risks still had to be taken to get food, water, and wood. For example, during most of the siege, one of the few sources of potable water was located near Sniper's Alley. People had to drink water to live and to get this life sustaining liquid they had to run a gauntlet under the gaze of waiting Serbian snipers. Also, people and soldiers had to regularly cross Sniper's Alley to get to the southern parts of the city still under Bosnian control. Even though north-south movement in the city was possible, the Serbian snipers tried hard to cut the city into northern and southern halves by focusing their efforts on Sniper's Alley.



Appropriately, the battle for Sarajevo began with a sniper attack along Sniper's Alley. The day was April 6, 1992, and thousands of Sarajevans gathered on the main boulevard, outside the Parliament building, to demonstrate for peace. Across the street (i.e. Sniper's Alley), just north of Parliament, was the Holiday Inn, a bright yellow building that became a famous landmark and reference point to all Sarajevans during the siege. In early April, the Holiday Inn was controlled by Serbs as it was the headquarters of the Serbian Democratic Party. While the crowd congregated on the streets in front of Parliament, hidden Serb snipers opened fire from the yellow Holiday Inn, wounding at least a dozen people. In response, the enraged crowd rushed the Holiday Inn, swarmed inside, and captured three people. One of those arrested was reported to be a bodyguard for a Serbian official. The bodyguard was found hiding in the cellar of the Holiday Inn, armed with a sniper rifle. From that day on, the Holiday Inn was controlled by the Bosnian security forces and ceased to be a roost for Serbian Snipers.

As the war progressed, award winning war correspondent Peter Maass saw that the yellow Holiday Inn became a favorite target for Serbian snipers almost as if to say, if you want the hotel, you can have it, and you can die in it. The Serbs no longer occupied the hotel, but they still shot at it. One day, in March 1993, a Serbian sniper, positioned west of the city, fired an anti-aircraft gun at the people passing by the hotel. At the same time, other Serbian snipers fired from the eastern end of the city, targeting the hotel. Maass estimated the sniper with the anti-aircraft weapon fired fifty shots a day. At the time of his report, the snipers, altogether, were firing a shot every thirty seconds. Eventually, one of the snipers hit a man caught in the open. As the victim screamed in pain, nearby bystanders sprinted from cover and dragged the wounded man to safety. Then, a car drove up and took the bleeding man to the nearby hospital, which was only a few blocks away. Soon after the stricken man was hauled away, two unsuspecting girls were also targeted as they walked by the hotel. After hearing a bullet whiz by them, they dove to the ground and crawled through the mud to safety before they took off running zig-zag to a safer location.

Not everyone was so lucky as to be merely wounded or to have to crawl through the mud to get away. Dienana Sokolovic lived with her family in Sarajevo where they were virtual prisoners in their own home because anyone who went outside was targeted by Serbian snipers. However, on November 18, 1994, a temporary cease fire was in effect and United Nations forces were present to enforce it. On that cold November day, Dienana and her seven year-old son, Nermin, took advantage of the lull in the shooting to go outside and find some firewood to heat their frigid home. As the two walked by a UN vehicle on their way home, a Serbian sniper picked them up in their scope. A single shot rang out and a bullet blew through Dienana’s stomach and plowed into Nermin’s head. The young boy died face down on the icy pavement, in a pool of his own spreading blood, in front of a UN armored personnel carrier. This was the reality of the Serbs’ sniper policy. This was the policy of Fry The Brain.

The Anonymous Killers

The men who blew the brains out of seven year-old boys did so from the security of the Serbian lines. These faceless killers lived in homes confiscated from non-Serbs and led relatively comfortable lives. Their homes had food, water, firewood, and electricity. While the Sarajevans sprinted for their lives, the Serbian snipers, who surrounded Sarajevo day and night, silently scanned the neighborhoods for their next prey. Since the Serbian snipers operated in relative safety, they could operate overtly. True, the Serbs had to be aware of the Bosnian's own snipers, but the Serbs still wore their uniforms openly as they went about their deadly work.

Sarajevans had little hope of finding out by name who the Serbian snipers that killed and maimed them. The Serbian military leadership certainly would not reveal who their snipers were and what areas of the city they targeted. Since numerous Serbian snipers overlapped one another, covering the same area of the city, only the individual sniper knew who they shot. For example, if there are three different snipers in three different locations targeted a man walking through the park behind the yellow Holiday Inn, only the man pulling the trigger knew who made the shot. The sniper who actually shot the unarmed civilian could always deny their role in the shooting since one of the other snipers could have done it as well. Multiple hidden snipers, firing at the same area of the city, provided the shooters with plausible deniability, making subsequent prosecution almost impossible.

Sarajevans hide behind a UN armored truck as they take cover from sniper fire.

While the majority of the Serbian snipers remained anonymous, some of the Sarajevans saw these killers up close. This close contact with their executioners happened whenever the Bosnian Serb Army recruited into their ranks other Bosnian Serbs who were from Sarajevo. These local recruits were a windfall to the BSA because they knew the city and the urban terrain like the back of their hands and, most importantly, they knew the people. But the Sarajevan snipers working on the Serbian side were not killing strangers; they were killing their own neighbors. For this reason, a Serbian sniper, who was from Sarajevo and still lived in their own neighborhood, had to be careful. In fact, they had to operate like a guerrilla if they were to successfully conceal their crimes.

Journalist Michael Montgomery wrote about such an instance where his Serbian friend, Predrag Bundalo, worked as a sniper during the day, but lived in his Sarajevo neighborhood of Grbavica at night. Grbavica, strategically located in South-central Sarajevo, bordered the southern edge of the Miljacka River. Unlike the rest of Sarajevo, Grbavica was captured by surging Serbian forces in early 1992 at the beginning of the siege. What followed in the wake of the

Serbian occupation of Grbavica was a particularly distasteful example of ethnic cleansing. In Grbavica, all the non-Serbs, to include old men, women, and children, were evicted from their homes, held as hostages, arbitrarily beaten, robbed, humiliated in every way possible, and executed at will. According to Human Rights Watch, the population of pre-war Grbavica was 31,000. After the brutal occupation by various Serb paramilitary groups, the post-war population was only 2,000.

Predrag was truly a product of the new, cleansed Grbavica. He initially scoffed at fighting his fellow Sarajevans, but when a Serbian soldier stuck a gun in his face and ordered him to fight or die, he made the obvious choice to fight. The people of Grbavica, just like Predrag, became polarized in the ethnic-religious war forced on them. There were no gray areas. Either you fought for the Serbs or you were an enemy of the Serbs. There was no in between. Rumor said Predrag took up arms as ordered and manned the front lines in Grbavica in an apartment building hovering high over the Miljacka River. From this tall, drab, concrete apartment building, across from the yellow Holiday Inn, Predrag and his fellow Serbs had an excellent view of Sniper's Alley.

However, Predrag did more than just man an outpost with his AK-47; he volunteered to become a sniper. Predrag's motivation for his new trade came after a Bosnian sniper shot and killed his close friend (who was a fellow Serb soldier) right in front of him. Afterwards, Predrag secured an old M-48 rifle, which is a Yugoslavian copy of the famous German Mauser K98, and mounted a scope on it. Predrag the reluctant soldier died alongside his friend. The new Predrag, armed with his accurate sniper rifle, began shooting across the Miljacka River with precision, killing his fellow Sarajevans. Along with this killing came a heavy drinking habit. The repeated, up-close killing of innocent people weighed so heavily on Predrag's mind he could only ease the burden through a painkiller - alcohol. Predrag was frying his own brain. After Predrag spent some time targeting Sarajevans across the Miljicka, he bragged to his own brother he already killed fifty people. A post-war investigation revealed Predrag was probably telling the truth since his favorite sniper position was across from a neighborhood where scores of innocent people were killed by sniper fire during the siege.

When the ugly siege of Sarajevo finally ended, the Bosnian War Crimes Commission investigated Predrag as a suspected war criminal. As fate would have it, the head of the war crimes commission was a Muslim lawyer who used to live in Predrag’s own apartment building. But Predrag would never be sentenced for his crimes. In May 1993, as Predrag sat in a friend’s apartment, he was shot point blank in the head, execution-style. Predrag’s death was ruled a suicide as no witnesses or potential suspects were ever named. The truth was that many people wanted Predrag dead. Ironically, some of Predrag’s fellow Serbs thought he helped his Muslim neighbors too much. The local Muslims, who suffered under the Serbian jackboot and witnessed Predrag’s own violent outbursts against them, also wanted him dead. In Sarajevo’s new polarized society, Predrag was caught in the middle which was a dangerous place to be.

Serbian Paramilitary Unit

A member of the infamous Arkan Tigers holds a Heckler & Koch G3A3 sniper rifle. With its bipod, scope, and accuracy out to 500 meters, the G3A3 is a perfectly suitable urban sniping weapon.

Even the Serbian military may have wanted Predrag dead. As a freelance sniper, killing unarmed civilians, Predrag was certainly carrying out an explicit Serbian policy of terror. However, since Predrag still lived among the remnants of the Grbavica populace and ran his mouth in bouts of drinking, his neighbors knew what he was doing. Predrag had lost his anonymity. Many people on both sides knew Predrag was a mass murderer. As a result, the Serb paramilitaries may have killed Predrag themselves just to shut his mouth. After all, the Serbs wanted to get away with their atrocities, they didn’t want to announce them publicly. The hard-drinking, violent, uncontrollable Predrag was a walking billboard for war crimes. With a bullet in Predrag’s head, the Serbs’ crimes were buried a little deeper. But not too deep.

Sport Sniping: An Urban Myth?

The intense sniper campaign, involving shooters from both sides, provided perfect fodder for a growing sniper cult. The good shooters quickly acquired a reputation and became larger than life. Rumors about these deadly, incredibly accurate shootists spread like hot shrapnel throughout the city. The image of these feared snipers, seared into the mind's eye of the tortured public and fed by a constant supply of bone gnawing terror and morbid curiosity, created new urban myths. One story said a woman, who was a former marksman on the Romanian Olympic team, was now a bounty hunter, killing Muslim children in Sarajevo for 500 deutschemarks apiece. Another story circulated about a lone Bosnian Serb hunter. This old, bearded man, who lived deep in the woods of middle Bosnia, had lost his son in the war. To avenge his son's death, the old man trudged to Sarajevo once a month to kill Sarajevans at random. A third tale said a young Bosnian girl, called the Raven, was forced out of her home at gunpoint, along with her family, by Serb paramilitaries. The Serbs proceeded to rape her, shoot her, and left her for dead. However, she lived and woke up in a ditch as a raven pecked at the eyes of her dead father. From that day on, the Raven began her own merciless sniper crusade, shooting as many Serbs as she could.

Along with these stories, another persistent rumor kept popping up concerning a new hobby for the outdoor-loving, adventurous type: the sport-sniping of Sarajevo's citizens. The first people to bring this practice to light were journalists who interviewed Bosnian Serbs on the front lines. One such journalist was Peter Maass who toured the Serbian lines and visited a Serbian heavy-machine gun position, pointing directly at the yellow Holiday Inn. During his conversations with the Serbs manning the machine-gun, the soldiers asked Maass if he wanted to fire off a few rounds at the hotel. Maass declined the invitation. But was this offer an isolated incident? Would other people get an invitation to kill Sarajevans? Would the next person, free from any legal repercussions whatsoever, decline the same tempting offer to kill? Or would they feel the adrenaline course through their body and make the decision to play God and take a life just because they could?

Maass was not alone in his experience. Another reporter recounted a similar story where a journalist visited a Bosnian Serb sniper position one night on the front lines to get a story. While the journalist was at the position, the Serbian sniper spotted two unsuspecting people down below, in the city, and asked the journalist who he should shoot…the one on the left or the one on the right? The journalist responded, with admirable moral strength, it was not his decision to make. This journalist was not going to play God. The sniper then proceeded to shoot both people. Afterwards, the sniper counseled the journalist if he chose one of the victims, he would have let the other one live. This is an interesting story because it puts the impartial journalist in a moral dilemma. The journalist is pressured into actually participating in the war, rather than just observing it, in order to save lives.

In an even more disturbing report, a UN soldier, who served in Sarajevo during the siege, said he knew of a German ‘businessman’ who took the idea of shooting Sarajevans, just for fun, a step further. This businessman is alleged to have organized actual tours to the front lines around Sarajevo, in collusion with the Bosnian Serbs, so his clients could snipe at the city’s people for sheer sport. While there is no hard evidence Europeans actually paid private businessmen to kill other humans for fun, many close observers of the siege of Sarajevo agree other Bosnian Serbs, who were not in the military and were not actively surrounding the city, did visit the Serbian lines and sniped at the people scurrying down below them in the city. These weekend warriors came to the front lines when their work schedules allowed them so they could bond with their Serbian brothers and help wipe out the Catholic Croatians and Bosnian Muslims infesting Sarajevo. In fact, the weekends were particularly deadly for Sarajevans because of the influx of these volunteer snipers who had some free time and an itchy trigger finger on their days off.

Grbavica

It was from these apartments in Grbavica where the Serbs directed most of their sniper campaign. The Holiday Inn and Snipers Alley was only a short several hundred meters away from these perfect sniper roosts.

The most damning evidence of sport-sniping involved an incident with Eduard Limonov, a well-known Russian author and extreme left-wing nationalist who supported the Serbs and their policies of ethnic-cleansing, indiscriminate terror, and system of concentration camps. During the war, Limonov traveled to Bosnia to meet with and publicly show his support for Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. While Limonov was in Bosnia, he traveled with Karadzic to Sarajevo so they could get a personal look at how the siege was going. While in the trenches, Karadzic invited Limonov to fire off a few rounds from a sniper rifle at the Sarajevans. Limonov was more than happy to comply. What better way to show one’s solidarity for the poor Bosnian Serbs than to help them kill their inhuman enemy, hunkered down in the ruins of Sarajevo? We know this incident is not mere rumor because a BBC news crew filmed the entire sniping incident on tape and aired it to the world.

To what extent sport-sniping went on during the siege is unknown. To the Serbs, sport-sniping was no more repulsive than their system of organized rape camps and, as such, was a reflection of the Bosnian Serb mentality. The Serbs saw the Sarajevans as animals, who anyone had the right to kill. You did not have to wear a uniform or even be a lawful combatant to kill. All you needed was a rifle, a bullet (and those items could be supplied free of charge for your convenience), and the desire to kill someone. The Serbs were glad to get more people involved in the killing because it made their hands appear less bloody and made their consciences a little clearer. After all, if journalists, European businessmen, famous authors, and average working class slobs were all sniping at and killing Sarajevans, it must be okay. It was to the Serbs' advantage to dirty the hands of others, to include them in their own criminal campaign of indiscriminate terror, because it weakened the world's ability to stop the Serbs or to punish them after the fact. If the whole world was sniping at the people of Sarajevo, what was the big deal?

Serbian War Crimes and the Sniper Campaign

There were many Serbian men like Predrag Bundalo and Eduard Limonov who killed innocent men, women, and children from the safety of their hidden sniper hides, separated by hundreds of meters of urban terrain. Most of these men never took a bullet to the head like Predrag or were caught on film like Limonov. Most escaped justice and blended back into Serbian and Bosnian society once the Dayton Peace Accords were signed. Dejan Anastasijevic interviewed one such former Serbian sniper who actually “worked” in Grbavica during the siege. Of course, the former sniper, now a waiter in a Belgrade cafe, says he never did anything wrong, he never targeted innocents.

A Muslim sniper shows his rifle with homemade suppressor to a UN patrol in 1993.

Who could prove he was lying? These anonymous killers could easily deny their wartime actions and claim to be common soldiers or even admit to being a sniper, but one that only engaged legitimate military targets. This denial of reality worked for the faceless men pulling the triggers, but not for their leaders who ordered the deliberate, coordinated sniper campaign against Sarajevo's population.

After the war ended and Sarajevans once again walked their streets without fear of absorbing a full-metal jacketed bullet, the UN war crimes tribunal pursued the architects of the siege of Sarajevo. One of the commanders who fell under UN scrutiny was Major General Stanislav Galic, commander of the Sarajevo Romanija Corps besieging Sarajevo from September 1992 until August 1994. Another war criminal was the subsequent commander of the Romanija Corps, Dragomir Milosevic, who commanded from August 1994 until the end of the war in late 1995. Even though Galic and Milosevic never pulled a trigger or killed an unarmed civilian with a sniper rifle, many of the men under their command did. According to the law of armed conflict, if they ordered their men to target civilians through a sniper campaign, they also committed a war crime. Furthermore, if they knew the men under their command were committing war crimes and then failed to stop them, they were again in breach of the law of armed conflict.

While Galic and Milosevic denied any direct knowledge of the crimes committed under their command, Louise Arbour, the prosecutor for the international criminal tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, had more than enough evidence to the contrary. The tribunal charged Galic and Milosevic both with crimes against humanity. The specific charges concerning the sniper campaign were explicit: “Between 10 September 1992 and 10 August 1994, Stanislav Galic, as Commander of Bosnian Serb forces comprising or attached to the Sarajevo Romanija Corps, conducted a coordinated and protracted campaign of sniper attacks upon the civilian population of Sarajevo, killing and wounding a large number of civilians of all ages and both sexes, such attacks by their nature involving the deliberate targeting of civilians with direct fire weapons.”

In 1999, Galic was arrested and put on trial at The Hague. While Galic maintained his innocence, he was hit with an avalanche of thoroughly documented examples of terror and murder. For example, on October 24, 1994, Adnan Kasapovic, a 16 year-old boy, was shot in the chest and killed while walking in an alley adjoining Dzordze Andrijevica Kuna Street. On December 8, 1994, Lejla Bajramovic, a woman aged 24 years, was sitting in a friend’s apartment in Franca Lehara Street, near the center of Sarajevo, when she was shot in the head and killed. The shot came through the apartment window. On May 3, 1995, Semsa Covrk a woman aged 27 years, was shot and wounded in the abdomen while walking in Josipa Krasa Street, Novi Grad, holding her young son’s hand at the time. The list went on and on and on.

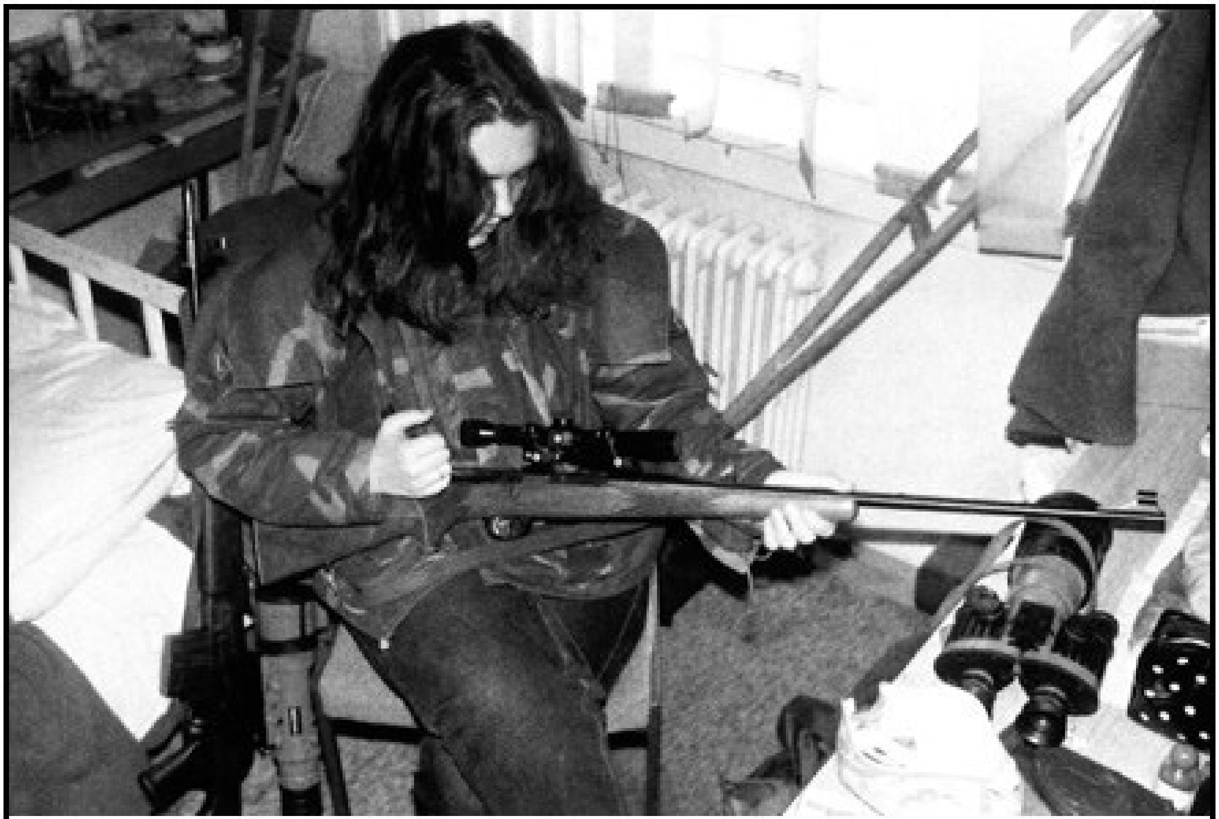
After being swamped with case after horrible case, to include eyewitness testimony, the lawyers defending Galic could not deny the sniper killings took place. Instead, the defense argued the civilians who were killed and wounded during the sniper campaign were ‘accidental victims’ and ‘collateral damage’ of the overall conflict. The judge presiding over the trial did not agree with the defense and Galic was sentenced to twenty years in prison (a sentence that was subsequently raised to life in prison.) General Milosevic finally surrendered to authorities in 2004 and his case went to trial in The Hague in January 2007. Later that year, Milosevic was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity and was sentenced to thirty-three years in prison. Just like the Nazis who were convicted of genocide against the Jews, the Serbian leadership was charged with their own war crimes, based largely on their sniper campaign. The judgments handed down at The Hague were intended to signal to the world that such crimes, directed against innocent people, were unacceptable. Maybe, just maybe, these rulings against the slaughter of innocent civilians at the hands of willing snipers would prevent similar crimes in the future.

The Bosnian Sniper Effort

The Bosnians trapped in Sarajevo, suffering a steady stream of losses under the Serbs' concerted sniper campaign, needed more than an eventual ruling at some distant UN court to stop the hemorrhaging. They too needed snipers to take out the Serbs' precision riflemen that ringed the city. Since the defending Bosnians did not have any professional snipers or an established sniper school to send new students through, they had to make do with what they had. As a result, the Bosnian sniper corps consisted of a hodgepodge of volunteers, both men and women, with varying skills and experience (if any), and an accompanying collage of sniper weapons. Bosnian government officials were quick to state they only had anti-sniper teams needed to fight the Serbs' own snipers. Truth be told, the Bosnians used snipers to pick off careless Serbian soldiers, to silence Serbian sniper teams, and even to spread terror amongst civilians living behind the Serbian lines.

One of the early sniper volunteers was a Serbian woman who went by the nom de guerre Arrow. The daughter of a policeman, Arrow grew up around guns, eventually took up the sport of target shooting, and even had plans to try out for the Yugoslav national shooting team. After the war engulfed Sarajevo, Arrow was no longer shooting paper targets, she was on a dedicated Bosnian sniper team, hunting down Serbian snipers and eliminating enemy machine-gun crews. For Arrow, her target shooting skills transferred easily to the urban battlefield, enabling her to rack up a long list of kills with her scope-mounted, bolt-action hunting rifle.

According to other rumors, the Bosnians employed another female sniper who was previously on the Yugoslav Olympic rifle team. The UN commander of Sarajevo, General MacKenzie, seemed to confirm these rumors by telling reporters he, too, heard of a woman Olympic shooter who already scored sixty-five kills early on in the siege.



The 20-year-old Serbian sniper "Arrow" defended Sarajevo until she was seriously wounded in December 1992.

Sniper Documentary

While stories of female Olympic shooters grabbed the imagination of Sarajevans and foreign journalists alike, the reality was often something different. Fortunately, a look into the daily life of Bosnia's real-life snipers was provided by French journalist Phillippe Buffon who made a 25-minute documentary about a group of Bosnian government snipers fighting in Sarajevo. The snipers in the documentary are not fiercely beautiful women, looking down the barrel of their expensive target rifles with eagle eyes; they are a group of average Bosnian Joes doing a dirty and dangerous job.

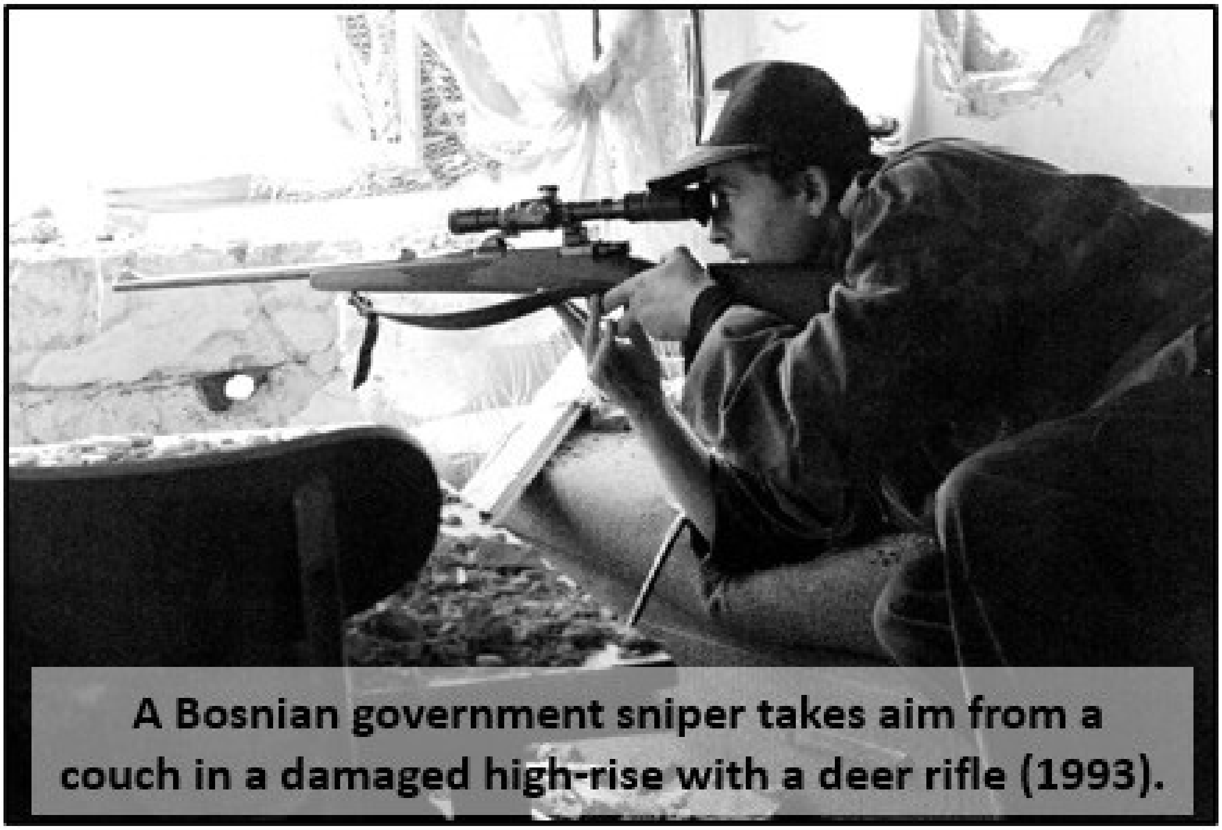
Appropriately enough, Buffon begins the film with himself dodging Serbian sniper fire as he runs from cover to cover until he safely reaches the thirty-story Parliament building housing a group of Bosnian snipers. It is interesting to note the Bosnian militia members that guide Buffon to the building carry weapons but are not wearing uniforms. If now-convicted General Galic had this movie in his hands during his trial, he would, without a doubt, have screamed, “Look how they carry weapons illegally with no uniform! Every person that our snipers shot was like this! As soon as we shoot an armed Bosnian, they hide the weapon and claim they are an innocent civilian!”

Inside the bowels of the towering building is a sniper group of about twenty men. The snipers are armed with Yugoslavian M76 sniper rifles, which they captured from the Serbs during previous fighting. The Bosnians have sniper teams positioned in the upper floors of the building and rotate them out every twenty-four hours. Buffon arrives in time to go with one of the shift changes, which consists of a two-man sniper team. One sniper is in a camouflaged uniform and carries an M76, with a scope, and a suppressor. The other shooter, a young man named Goran, also has an M76 with a scope, but no suppressor. Goran is wearing a blue, one-piece coverall, like what a mechanic might wear.

The two men take the still-working elevator to the upper floors to find a room to shoot from, like two businessmen going to their office to sell life insurance. From their sniper’s perch, they have a commanding view of the Miljacka River and the Serb-held neighborhood of Grbavica. Goran is from Grbavica. Most likely, he knows who Predrag Bundalo is – the Sarajevan Serb turned sniper. Unknowingly, Predrag and Goran have dueled against each other for the past several months. Both grew up in the same neighborhood, one a Serb and one a Muslim, and both are snipers trying to kill each other - another sad story in a city torn apart by polarized factions.

From the room overlooking Grbavica, Goran takes aim and fires two shots. After the last bullet flies downrange, Goran and his partner quickly leave the room and go down the nearby stairs and change levels to escape any possible Serbian counterattack. Goran is smart to vacate the immediate area because his sniper tradecraft is almost non-existent. All Goran does is walk in a room with a good view, aims his rifle for several seconds, fires a few shots out of a shattered window, and then moves to another position. Goran makes no effort to hide his muzzle blast and flash and any alert Serbian counter-sniper team could have seen and heard Goran's gunshots with ease.

Two things probably save Goran as a sniper. First, the Parliament building they operate in has dozens of floors and hundreds of rooms and windows to shoot from. Any one of these places in the enormous building could be used as a sniper hide. This sheer volume of possible firing locations alone makes it difficult for the Serbs to locate Goran's team because they are constantly changing positions. Goran's team shoots, moves, and then they are gone, lurking somewhere else inside the hulking building. Second, the Serbian counter-sniper teams are probably as unskilled as the Bosnian snipers. The Serbs know the Bosnians have been using the Parliament building ever since the start of the war as a sniper post. However, Goran and his partners are able to fire multiple shots, in broad daylight, and get away with it. Goran may not be a very skilled sniper, but he does not have to be. He is on par with his Serbian foe.



A Bosnian government sniper takes aim from a couch in a damaged high-rise with a deer rifle (1993).

After this first episode, Goran and his partner go to another location. This time, Goran’s partner with the suppressed rifle takes aim and fires several shots. However, Goran’s partner positions himself deep in the room so he is hidden by the shadows, behind the office’s desks and window blinds. When Goran’s partner makes his shots, even an alert Serbian counter-sniper team would be unable to determine his location. After this operation, Buffon films one more scene of other Bosnian snipers shooting from a bombed-out apartment building in the western suburb of Dobrinja, near the airport. These shooters also show very little knowledge of sniper tradecraft. Clearly they are untrained men and women who have been given a sniper rifle and told to go kill Serbs. In their minds, all you have to do is poke a rifle out through a hole in a wall, pull the trigger, then move to a new location somewhere in the ruins of the huge building and do it again.

Overall, the Bosnian snipers in the film are untrained in even the most rudimentary urban sniping tradecraft. They know enough to shoot and move because their comrades before them have been shot up by the Serbs before by not moving after shooting. Their understanding of sniper warfare is based entirely on personal experience. The reason why the Bosnian shooters can get away with their limited skill level is because the complex urban terrain allows them to. This documentary clearly shows what an equalizer the urban terrain is and how it protects the Bosnians from the more professional, organized Serb attackers.

Shot Through Heart

One of the true tragedies of the Bosnian war was friend often fought friend. After the war broke out, people who knew each other all their lives now found themselves committed to killing each other. This was the case with two long-time friends, Slavko Simic and Vlado Sarzinsky, who, before the war, competed on the same Yugoslav national marksmanship team. With Sarajevo at war, Slavko, a Serb, was called up to fight in the new Bosnian Serb Army. Vlado, a Croat with a Muslim wife, choose to stay and defend Sarajevo. The war, like a giant bloody axe, effectively cleaved their relationship in half now that a Serb was expected to kill a Croat or Muslim and a Croat or Muslim was expected to return the favor.

Slavko’s expertise as a long-distance rifle marksman inevitably led him to become a sniper for the Bosnian Serb Army where his extreme skill enabled him to train other Serbian snipers to become better shooters. For the Serbs and their sniper campaign, Slavko was a gift from heaven because he enabled the Serbs to spread their terror more accurately and from longer ranges. However, Slavko did not just train others to spread terror, he personally participated in the slaughter, skillfully picking off unsuspecting men, women, and children with a single head shot, at extreme distances, from his customized target rifle.

On the opposite side of the battlefield, amidst the partially destroyed buildings and pockmarked streets, Vlado also served as a sniper. While sharing the same vocation as Slavko, Vlado’s job was to stop the killing of Sarajevans by taking out the Serbs’ own sniper teams. Vlado and the anti-sniper teams he trained proved successful, taking out twenty Serb snipers in the first three months of the war alone. Ironically, both men, due to their shooting skills and the importance of sniping in Sarajevo’s urban setting, ended up training and leading competing sniper teams. Eventually, Vlado’s and Slavko’s paths crossed.

The collision course began in July 1992 when a particularly skilled Serbian sniper began working Vlado’s neighborhood. Vlado described the new presence, “This one was different from the others. He shot from extremely far away, an expert shooter. Must be. Four, five hundred meter. And from that distance he never missed, always hitting his target in the head. Consistent. Always in head.”

Vlado spent the following days studying this new threat, talking to people, and observing the urban terrain as he conducted an investigation in order to glean anything that might betray the enemy sniper. Finally, after a thorough detective effort, Vlado spoke to a medic who extracted a bullet from one of the victims. It was a 7.92 mm bullet, what is often referred to as a German 8 mm round. Then, a week after talking to the medic, the deadly Serb sniper took another shot, and Vlado heard an unmistakable sound – that of a 7.92 mm rifle.

A Croation sniper team armed with a Zastava M76 rifle looks for Serbian targets from a destroyed bank (1993).

Vlado recognized the sound of the 7.92 mm rifle as a Mauser K98. He knew the sound because he shot the Mauser K98 for years on the national rifle team with Slavko. The distinctive sound of the Mauser was much different from the sounds of the 7.62 mm M-76 sniper rifle most of the Serb snipers used. In fact, no one used a 7.92 mm rifle anymore. The 7.92 mm round was used by the Germans during WW II, but since was replaced by the standard 7.62 mm NATO round. Vlado calculated at the start of the war there were sixteen Mauser 98's in Sarajevo and he could account for fourteen of them. One of the missing two rifles belonged to Slavko.

In late July, the Serb sniper made a mistake. He was seen by one of Vlado's spotters as he entered a building, only two hundred meters away from the front lines. Vlado then moved into an opposing position, so he had a good view of the sniper when he exited his hide. Hours later, Vlado heard the distinctive report of the Mauser K98 and then saw a sniper running from the building. Vlado took aim, fired, and knocked the running sniper to the ground. Weeks later, Vlado talked to a former prisoner who was exchanged for other Serb prisoners. The ex-prisoner told Vlado what he already suspected but did not want to hear: the sniper he shot was his best friend, Slavko.

Freelance journalist John Falk, while he worked in Sarajevo, had a chance to talk to a Serbian defector named Slobo who was stationed in the front lines across from Vlado's sniper positions. Slobo told Falk, “Everyone out there knows of Vlado. The Chetniks call him the Ustashe, and he is the devil to them. Anyone here long enough fears the Ustashe. The new guys come on the line, but they don't know. I would try to tell them: Be careful, the Ustashe is out there. This man will kill you if you are not careful. Young guys, stupid, don't believe.”

The Serbs called Vlado the “Ustashe” because they knew Vlado was Croatian. During World War II, the fascist Croatian government, called the Ustashe, collaborated with Hitler's Germany and practiced their own bloody ethnic-cleansing campaign against the Serbs.

Falk, who spent many long hours with Vlado on sniper duty, noted Vlado was such a good urban sniper because he was a good observer. Vlado spent most of his time doing nothing more than watching and recording the urban terrain on the Serbian side. Vlado valued observation so much he organized teams of spotters who did nothing but watch the Serb lines. These observers recorded everything in their notebooks. Everything. They watched the Serbian people. They watched windows. They watched bunkers. They watched holes in the walls of buildings. They looked for the smallest detail that might reveal an enemy sniper's position. Then they wrote it down so all the other snipers could read and study the history of the neighborhood they were stalking. It was this steady, methodical approach that enabled Vlado to out-duel Slavko, to shoot scores of Serbian snipers and soldiers, and to make it through four years of war alive.

Yugoslavian M48 Mauser

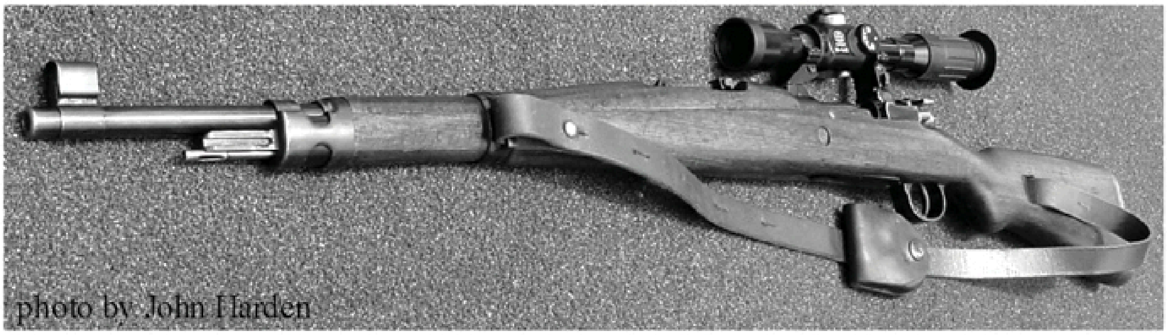


photo by John Harden

Above is an actual M48 sniper rifle, fitted with a Zrak ON-76 scope, used by Bosniak snipers to defend Sarajevo. The M48 was made at the Preduzece 44 arms factory, which was part of Zastava Arms. Before the war, Yugoslavian competition shooters frequently used the M48 for their target matches. When war came to Sarajevo, both Serbian and Bosniak snipers employed these same weapons on the front lines.

Guerrilla Sniper Operations

While the initial stages of the war demanded any person with better than average shooting skills become a sniper, the defending Bosniak forces eventually developed a more sophisticated, deliberate sniper effort. This advanced sniping was developed covertly in a Bosnian paramilitary unit called 'Seve' (seva means "lark") which answered only to the senior Bosniak political leadership, to include the head of the Bosniak government itself: Alija Izetbegovic.

One of the specially trained snipers from the Seve, Nedzad Herenda, when being interrogated by the Bosniak intelligence service, described some of their training. Herenda, and other snipers who worked with him, to include foreign fighters, attended sniper instruction at various camps located in territory still under Bosnian government control. After receiving training in the fundamentals of marksmanship, the Seve snipers honed their skills by sniping at civilians living in the Serb-occupied suburb of Grbavica. Herenda and the other snipers found any civilian to be suitable as a target, like old women. When shooting old women, they made sure the victims were wearing all black, which was a common practice by elderly Christian women. The Seve shooters wanted to make sure they gunned down Christian, not Muslim, women.

Besides terrorizing the civilian populace through illegal killings, Seve was assigned even more politically sensitive operations, like the shooting of UN peacekeepers. In one particular incident, the Seve allegedly shot and killed a French soldier in downtown Sarajevo so it looked like the Serbs did the sniping. But, after a battlefield investigation, the UN determined the bullet could not have been fired from Serb held territory in Grbavica as first claimed. Even though investigators determined the French peacekeeper was not fired on from Serbian lines, they could not prove who actually pulled the trigger.

After this botched attempt to incriminate the Serbs in order to bring increasing UN political and military pressure against the Serbs, the Bosnian government used their political leverage to protect the Seve and prevent any further investigation into the matter. This was relatively easy to do because of the lack of forensic evidence and because the general public already knew Serb snipers targeted UN forces in the past. As a result of the Serbs' dismal sniping track record, which made it possible to frame them in the first place, it was hard for any investigation to build momentum.

Sarajevo's Counter-Sniper Response

Dedicated anti-sniper teams, like the ones trained by Vlado, were just one way the Bosnians tried to lessen the effects of the Serbs' own sniper campaign. But, clearly, this was not enough to ensure the safety of Sarajevo's population. Just as the Bosnian snipers learned through trial and error, the hundreds of thousands of Sarajevans who suffered under the longest sniper campaign in history, became well versed in counter-sniper methodology through experience. It did not take long before everyone, from little children to old women, knew what it took to avoid getting hit by a Serbian sniper. Soon, warning signs emblazoned with “Pazi! Snajper!” sprung up across the city, cautioning people about particularly dangerous areas. Eventually, every technique known to man was used to stay alive, including new ones the world never saw before.

One of the easiest things to do to stay alive was to not give the Serbian snipers an easy target. People who lived in buildings located in the line of fire walled off the side of their buildings facing the enemy. Windows were boarded up, bricked up, or covered with blankets. Doors were nailed shut. People then altered their movement to and from their buildings so they always left through the back to avoid the more dangerous exposed ones. If the distance from one building to another was reasonable, the neighborhood got together and dug trenches between them so they could travel back and forth, out of sight of wary Serbian snipers.

Traveling in the open on the streets and sidewalks always involved an element of danger. Consequently, Sarajevans driving in cars sped down exposed routes like madmen, with tires squealing and brakes screeching, as they dodged potholes made by incoming mortar rounds, to make themselves a harder target. Pedestrians – old men, teenagers, little children or anyone else who wanted to live - sprinted from cover to cover. If they were in the open for long periods of time, they ran zig-zag patterns to throw off Serbian marksmen. Although it had nothing to do with fitness, Sarajevo became a city of avid runners. Walking and driving slowly increased your chances of catching a bullet. If you wanted to live, you went everywhere fast and in an erratic manner.

Whenever possible, additional measures were taken to protect the citizens of Sarajevo. For example, Kulovica Street ran North-South through downtown Sarajevo, offering Serbian snipers an open, linear kill zone. To block the Serbian view of the Sarajevans passing by Kulovica Street, the Bosnians emplaced a giant concrete block in front of it. This block eventually became a well-known landmark after someone spraypainted the words “Pink Floyd” across it. The block was removed during a temporary 1994 cease-fire, but the sniping soon renewed. This time, Kulovica Street was blocked off with an enormous piece of blue cloth that once hung at the Zetra sports hall, where the 1984 winter Olympics were officially closed. This blue shield, that once provided a royal backdrop to competing Olympians, now hid Sarajevans from Serbian snipers.

Sometimes nature helped protect the city of Sarajevo from accurately fired bullets. Whenever it rained, snipers had a difficult time acquiring potential targets. The same could be said during periods of fog and snow. The winter months provided much needed relief from the snipers because the days were shorter and the nights longer. While the Serbians did have some night vision equipment for their rifles, it was much harder to make a night shot as one stared through the grainy, greenish hue of a nightscope. Sarajevans were probably never safer from the sniper threat than at night and in bad weather. Then, they could be safe with a slow jog or by simply moving while concealed in the darkness.

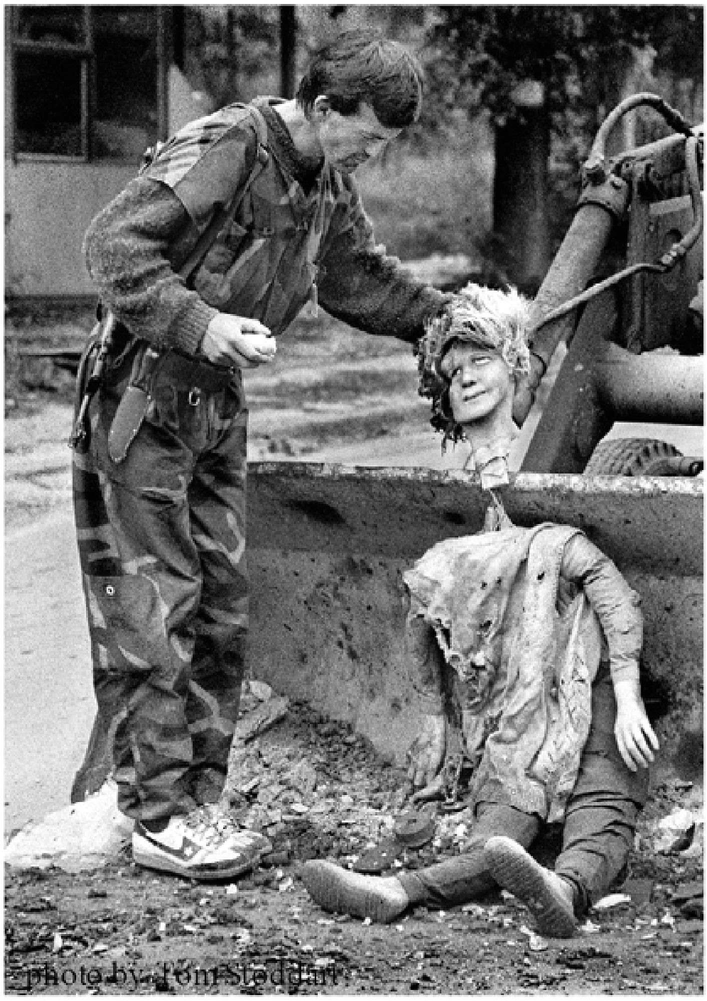


photo by Tom Stoddart

Counter-Sniper

A Bosniak soldier replaces the head on a dummy in Sarajevo. The intent was for the Serbian snipers to shoot at the dummy, thus revealing their position. Then, the Bosniak snipers, who were hiding in the city nearby, would spot the Serbian muzzle blasts and then zero in on the now-exposed Serbian shooter. Counter- sniper ruses like this had been used at least since WW I and were still effective in the Siege of Sarajevo.

The Airfield Problem

From the early stages of the siege, both attacking Serbs and defending Bosnians agreed to let the United Nations (UN) administer Sarajevo International Airport. Control of the airport was a critical issue because it enabled the UN to fly in humanitarian aid like medical supplies and food to the besieged Sarajevans. For sure, Sarajevans benefited from the UN aid because city officials were able to provide a higher level of care for their trapped citizens. Thousands of more Sarajevans would have undoubtedly perished through starvation, dehydration, and lack of medical care if the airport was not run by the UN. However, the attacking Serbs benefited too. By allowing the UN to run the airport and provide humanitarian aid, the Serbs showed to the world they were not fighting a war against the citizens of Sarajevo.

The UN control of the airport did help the Sarajevans, but the airport’s location caused problems for the Bosnian government because it was located in an exposed suburb, several kilometers southwest of downtown Sarajevo. In order for Sarajevans to make it to or from the airport, they had to run a gauntlet of fire from wary Serbian snipers. The UN forces running the airport were themselves in a precarious situation because the airport was the only place on the Sarajevo perimeter not controlled by the Serbs. While the Serbs physically controlled the northern and southern ends of the airport, Bosnian government forces controlled the eastern and western sides of the airport. Consequently, UN forces were caught quite literally in between the warring sides, sandwiched in between two separate groups trying to kill one another.

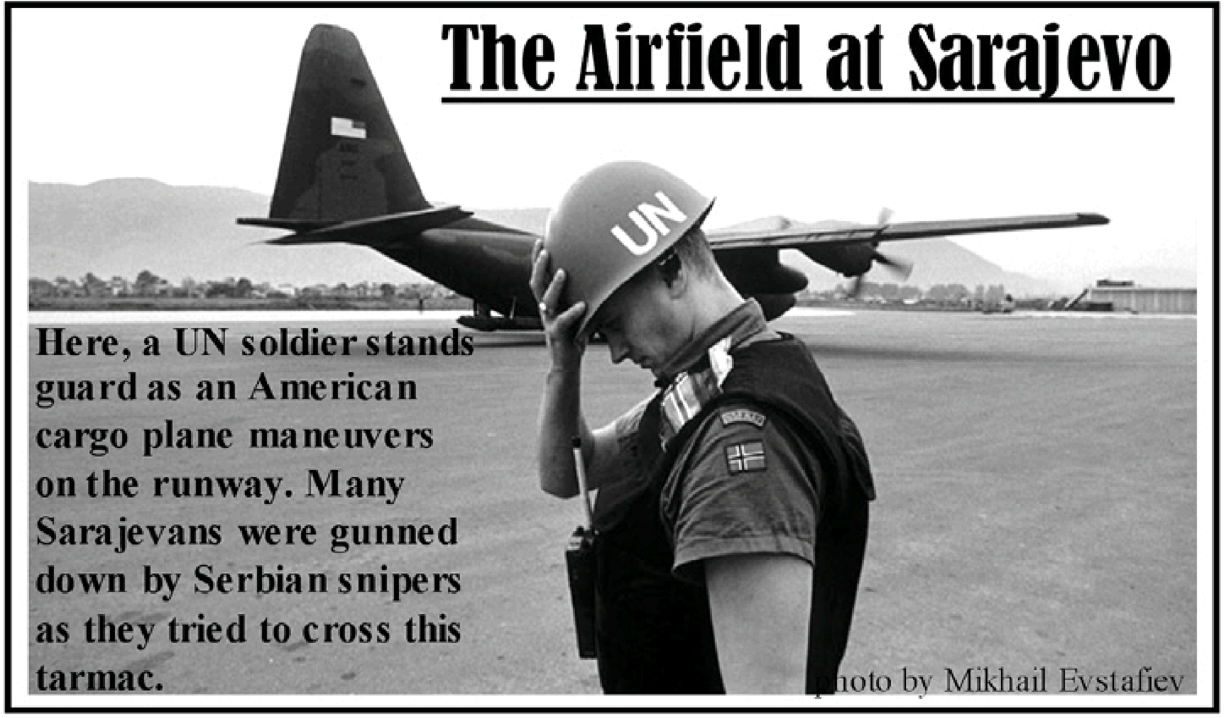
The Serbs agreed to let the UN run the airport, but at a price. The Serbs would only let the UN control the airport if they prevented the Bosnians from crossing from the east, over the airfield itself, and into the western Bosnian held side. Consequently, the UN was placed in a position of helping to enforce the Serbian stranglehold on the city while providing aid to the very citizens the Serbs targeted with snipers and artillery. Still, many Sarajevans defied the UN and tried to sprint across the open tarmac to the relative safety of the western side. A lot of people did successfully evade the UN security guards and dodge the Serbian snipers as they ran for dear life across the asphalt pavement to the west.

But crossing the windswept tarmac under the scopes of Serbian shooters was expensive. Hundreds of people are estimated to have been gunned down as they ran frantically in the open, completely exposed to the Serbs. Ironically, the UN forces helped the Serb shooters do their dirty work. Often times, UN security forces exposed groups of Sarajevans with floodlights as they made a mad nighttime dash to freedom. Once the people were lit up under the UN lights, the Serbian shooters had perfect targets. Men, women, and children of all descriptions met their end on the exposed airfield as they tried to make it past the UN guards aiming their bright spotlights and the hidden Serb marksmen aiming their sniper rifles.

By the end of 1992, it was clear the UN controlled airport was a major obstacle to the Bosniak government that had to be overcome.

True, pockets of desperate civilians made it across the airfield on occasion, but loads of weapons, ammunition, and fuel certainly could not make it through the gauntlet. Consequently, the Bosnian government made the decision (a decision that was a closely guarded secret) to dig a tunnel underneath the airport to connect the two Bosnian sides separated by the airport. Work started in early 1993 from both sides. It took months of back-breaking work, but after workers toiled night and day in eight-hour shifts, the two sides met together in July of 1993. The physical encirclement of the city was broken.

From that point on, weapons and people flowed underneath the airport. Sometimes it took up to two hours to travel the eight hundred meters, through the claustrophobic confines of the hastily excavated tunnel. While the journey could be drawn out and exhausting, it was infinitely preferable to running helter-skelter across the runway under the crosshairs of a Serbian sniper. The Serbian shooters could not see through tons of earth nor could they shoot through the paved runway. For the Sarajevans, the best counter-sniper method at the airport was to go underground like human moles.



The Airfield at Sarajevo

Here, a UN soldier stands guard as an American cargo plane maneuvers on the runway. Many Sarajevans were gunned down by Serbian snipers as they tried to cross this tarmac.

photo by Mikhail Evstafiev

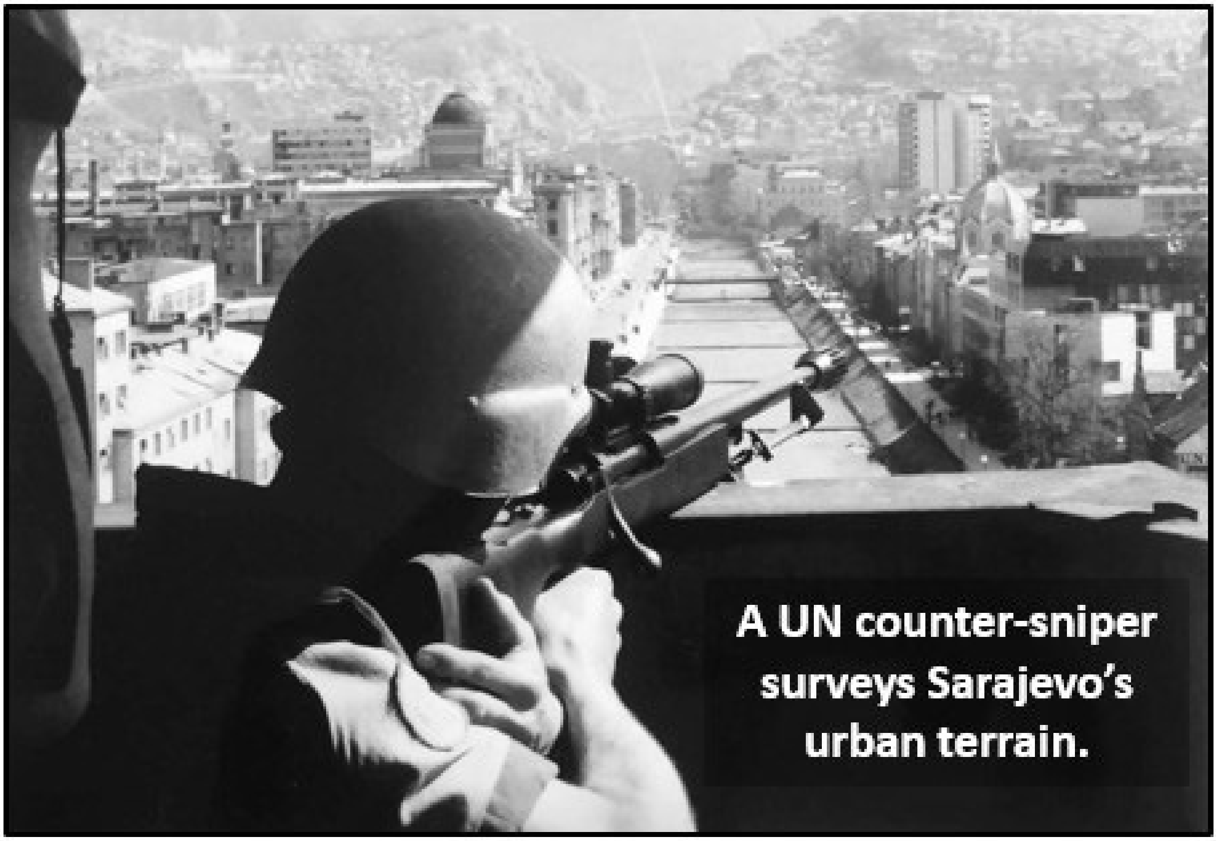
The United Nations' Counter-Sniper Efforts

The UN first became involved in Yugoslavia's war in September 1991 when the Security Council adopted a resolution calling on all states to enforce a "general and complete embargo on all deliveries of weapons and military equipment to Yugoslavia." While this resolution appeared to be a fair and balanced way to limit an increase in the scope of the war, it hurt the Bosnian government more than the Serbs. This was because the Bosnian Serbs were supplied from the arsenals of the former JNA while the Bosnian government had to smuggle in arms from the international black market. This also meant while Bosnian Serbs targeted Sarajevans with state of the art .50 caliber Black Arrow sniper rifles manufactured by the Zastava Arms Factory, the Bosnian defenders resorted to using World War II-era rifles or sniper rifles captured from the Serbs.

From the initial stages of fighting in Sarajevo, the UN had a presence in the city. Their biggest impact, as mentioned, was the impartial management of Sarajevo Airport starting in July 1992. Besides the airport, the UN also had several outposts located throughout the city where they could monitor the fighting and better carry out their mission, which was to make the siege more humane by providing food supplies and medical care to the people, to evacuate people by air, to facilitate Red Cross operations, and to influence the way both sides fought the war. One of the ways the UN attempted to make the war more humane for Sarajevans was to protect them from the Serbian snipers ringing the city.

One thing UN forces could do to protect the people was to transport them from one place in the city to another inside the armored hulls of the UN's distinctive, whitewashed armored personnel carriers. Thus, the UN, at times, became an armored taxi service. But traveling in an armored car was no guarantee of safety as one could get shot as they entered and exited the vehicle. In fact, acting Bosnian Prime Minister Hakija Turajlic was shot in 1993 while riding in the back of a UN armored car as a French patrol escorted him from the airport. The French soldiers made the mistake of opening the rear of the vehicle at a checkpoint and then left it open as they drove off.

The UN did more than provide transportation in the city; they also provided a presence in civilian areas. This UN presence was meant to deter Serbian snipers by saying, in effect, hey, we're the UN, we can see what is going on, so you better not shoot at the surrounding civilians because we will know who did it. Again, being near a UN checkpoint or patrol did not automatically extend an invisible force field of protection around Sarajevans as many a person was shot within a stone's throw of UN soldiers on anti-sniper duty. It also did not help the Sarajevans' confidence much when the UN soldiers themselves were targeted by Serbian snipers, as they frequently were.



A UN counter-sniper surveys Sarajevo's urban terrain.

Another counter-sniper measure the UN tried at various times during the siege was the arrangement of anti-sniping agreements between the warring sides. Often, such agreements were not worth the paper they were written on. In Sarajevo, such anti-sniping agreements lasted, maybe, for a few weeks or only days before a sniper decided, at least for him, the truce was over. During the trial of General Galic, an eyewitness for the prosecution, Mensur Jusic, described in detail one such incident where an anti-sniper truce only led to more carnage. It was September 1993 and an anti-sniper truce was in effect. Sarajevans felt a little more relaxed, walked a little more slowly, and even rode on the city's trams. Then, as one tram trundled along its tracks, a Serbian sniper could not resist such a fat target - a tram packed with unsuspecting civilians. At an intersection, the sniper opened fire, hitting the tram with a bursting bullet, wounding four people to include the prosecution's witness, Mensur Jusic, and another witness's eight-year-old son. After the bullet impacted, the people dove to the floor for protection, lying in the blood that was now everywhere, until the tram driver accelerated out of the kill zone.

The UN's Anti-Sniper Failure

The UN also established dedicated anti-sniper teams whose job was to enforce the anti-sniper truces. However, these teams did not operate in the classic anti-sniper role and were largely ineffective. During a sniper truce agreed to on August 14, 1994, French peacekeeping soldiers were assigned the job of anti-sniping duties. What this equated to was the peacekeepers would observe the surrounding terrain and whenever a sniper made a shot, they would record the events, such as the date and time of the shot, from what location the shot came from, and which side they thought fired the shot. That was it. The UN anti-sniper teams had no teeth and were incapable of enforcing the truce. The teams only had the authority to arrest confirmed snipers who violated the truce and they could only use deadly force to defend themselves if they came under fire.

Since the UN was the only force in the city considered a higher authority, with the ability to influence the actions of the warring parties by arresting violators of a sniper truce, both sides found it to their advantage to conceal their sniper operations. For this reason, both Bosnian government snipers and Serbian snipers acted like guerrillas when the situation demanded it. It was easy for these guerrilla snipers to conceal their actions when they sniped at "off-limit" people during the truces (like civilians, journalists and UN soldiers) due to the disposition of UN forces in the city.

Because the UN forces were positioned at various compounds at the airport and in the city itself, they were located relatively far from the Serbian front lines and their sniper positions. So, if a Serbian sniper fired on an unarmed civilian during a sniper truce, what was the UN going to do? A UN anti-sniper team would have to determine the location of the shot, and then drive for ten minutes across open terrain, in their white armored personnel vehicles, until they reached the Serbian lines. Once they reached the Serbian lines, the Serbs may or may not agree to let the UN patrol enter their lines, or they may delay the patrol, giving the sniper time to get away. When the UN patrol finally reached the suspected location of the shot, the Serbian sniper was long gone, hiding safely as a regular soldier somewhere else in the Serbian lines.

Zastava M76

7.92x57 mm Mauser

The M76 was produced by Zastava Arms in 1976 as the designated marksman rifle for the Yugoslavian Army. It was used by all sides in the Bosnian Civil War.

Even if a UN patrol found the person who they thought fired the shot, how were they going to prove it? The patrol would have to, first, find the weapon fired in the incident and then seize it as evidence. Then, the patrol would have to go back to the scene of the shooting, find the bullet fired from that rifle, and then compare that bullet to a sample bullet fired from the captured weapon, all in a forensic lab. If it could be proven the captured rifle fired the bullet that hit an innocent victim, then the UN still had to prove a particular Serbian soldier fired that rifle. And where were the anti-sniper teams' fingerprint kits? Where were their gunshot residue test kits? Were these anti-sniper teams trained to dust a rifle for fingerprints and to test a person for residue in order to irrefutably link a suspected shooter with a specific weapon? Hardly. The UN was ill-prepared to conduct anything beyond basic battlefield investigations and had little chance to capture a Serbian sniper after the act.

In comparison, the UN had a better chance to capture Bosnian snipers who violated the sniper truces because the UN could move freely in the city, among the people. The UN did not have to cross a Bosnian trench line or get permission to pass through a Bosnian checkpoint because UN forces lived in the city, behind the Bosnian lines, and in many ways aided the Bosnians in their defense of the city. Therefore, the Bosnian snipers had to be more skilled at hiding their sniping activities than the Serbs who were separated by distance and the real barrier of a front line.

One day, at the end of August 1994, just two weeks into a UN enforced sniper truce, several uniformed Bosnian men were seen in front of a downtown cafe, armed with sniper rifles. Then, they got in a beat-up, bullet-ridden Volkswagen Golf, drove off down the street, and snuck into the Parliament building. After firing several shots at the Serbians' own snipers positioned in the opposing Jewish cemetery, the snipers hastily departed the Parliament building and returned to the cafe, minus their weapons. French soldiers of the UN force heard the shooting and knew it came from the Parliament building. In response, the French soldiers contacted the Sarajevo police in order to get them to investigate the shooting and arrest the violators of the truce.

Of course, the police had no interest in investigating anything that involved their own snipers. By the time the French forces, along with a contingent of Sarajevan police, actually reached and surrounded the Parliament building to search for the snipers, the shooters were long gone. Fortunately for the shooters, the police stalled the UN forces long enough for the Bosnian snipers to escape the scene of the shooting, ditch their weapons, and resume their lounging at the cafe. In this case, even though the UN had better access and freedom of movement in the city, the Sarajevan police used their authority to hinder the UN investigation in order to keep the Bosnian snipers on the streets.

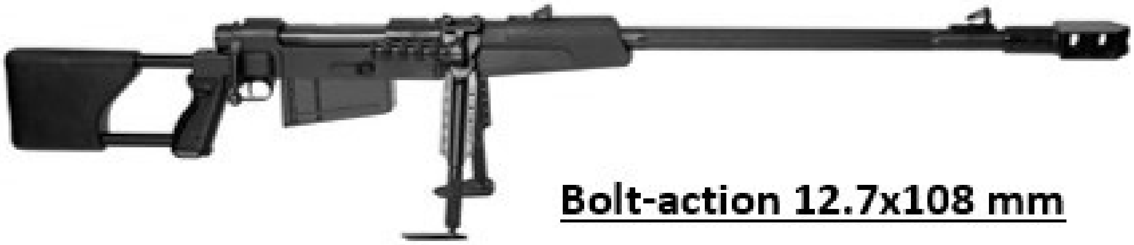
Even if the UN forces captured this particular group of shooters, it would not have solved the underlying problem, which was the fact these Bosnian snipers were responding to the Serbians' snipers who were also violating the sniper truce by continuing to fire on Sarajevans from their positions in the old Jewish cemetery. If the UN silenced these Serbian sniper positions from the start, the Bosnians would not have felt compelled to respond in kind. At least in the incident described above, the Bosnians were targeting legitimate enemy combatants. It was this lack of real power to react to the sniper threat that ultimately made the UN's anti-sniper efforts ineffective. The Serbians, the originators of the sniper terror campaign, understood only one thing – force. To the Serbs, truces meant nothing and the UN's weak attempts at arresting their snipers just underlined UN impotence.

For example, UN forces once caught a Serbian sniper firing on a Red Cross vehicle and went to the house where the shot was fired from. After knocking on the front door, the patrol talked to the sniper's mother and told her to warn her son not to do it again because, next time, they would do something about it. One would guess the UN forces thought a really stern scolding would stop the Serbian sniper campaign. This lack of a resolute response to the indiscriminate killing of innocent people only emboldened the Serbian snipers.

The NATO Response

After the Dayton Peace Accords of December 1995, NATO became involved in maintaining the peace in Sarajevo and elsewhere as SFOR (Stabilization FORce). Because of the UN's previous weak responses to Serbian snipers, the Serbians were emboldened to challenge and intimidate the new NATO forces just like they did to the UN forces for the last three and a half years. In the last week of January 1996 alone, NATO catalogued a sniper attack a day in Sarajevo, including two that wounded both an American and a British soldier. On February 1, French forces under NATO command also came under sniper attack, except this time, they responded with deadly force and actually killed the sniper. A French patrol subsequently found the bodies of two gunmen in a so called 'zone of separation' between the Serb-controlled suburbs and the Bosnian-held city. NATO officers concluded the two men who committed the shooting were Serbian snipers.

Zastava M93 Black Arrow



Bolt-action 12.7x108 mm

The M93 was designed in 1993 and entered full production in 1998. It may have seen limited use in the war by Serbian forces for testing and evaluation.

Apparently, NATO forces thought a tougher approach was needed to stop the Serbian snipers because the authority to arrest or to act merely in self-defense was insufficient. Instead, NATO adopted a shoot-on-sight policy to send the Serbs, who only understood words backed up by the barrel of a gun, a message NATO was not going to be intimidated or publicly humiliated like the UN was. In fact, the French killing of the two Serbian snipers was accompanied with a statement by the commander of NATO forces in Bosnia, U.S. Admiral Leighton Smith, who pledged his forces would retaliate swiftly, with force, against snipers targeting NATO troops.

Admiral Smith made the comment, “We’ve got some jerk up there pulling a trigger and he’s got a nightscope. That makes it tough. But, boy, let me tell you, if we do see him he had better be fast and be clad in bullet-proof stuff because we will attack without warning.” According to a Bosnian Serb television broadcast, NATO ground forces commander Lieutenant General Michael Walker even called up Bosnian Serb parliamentary speaker Momcilo Krajisnik and told him to stop the sniping incidents. In true Serbian fashion, Krajisnik condemned the incidents. What else was he going to do? Admit to the sniping attacks against NATO soldiers?

Fallout from the Sniper Campaign: Spiraling Brutality

NATO's tougher stance came four years too late for the citizens of Sarajevo who suffered for forty-four months under the longest sniper siege in the history of urban warfare. NATO intervention came only after 1030 people were wounded, 225 people were killed, and 60 children were murdered by Serbian snipers. Importantly, killing these unarmed men, women, and children by rifle was a conscious act. If one were to fire a mortar round into the city, at least they were not targeting a specific person. A mortar round was too inaccurate to reliably hit an individual. A mortar round was more often than not delivered to, "Whom it may concern."

In contrast, the act of killing a person with a sniper rifle is a personal event. The sniper, with their enhanced optics in the form of a telescopic scope, sees exactly who they are killing. It is not a random act. Consequently, when a Serbian sniper blew the brains out of a seven-year old boy with a precisely placed bullet, they knew what they were doing. Just as another Serbian sniper who shot a young woman in the stomach, blowing out her guts, he too knew exactly what he was doing.

It was this specific campaign of mass murder by the Serbian snipers that prompted Goran, the young Bosnian man in Philippe Buffon's sniper documentary, to refer to the Serbians as "animals." Goran may not have known it at the time, but he, just like the Serbian snipers who killed innocent people with glee, became polarized. Because the Serbs and their snipers treated the Bosnians and Sarajevans like so many wild boar to be shot at one's leisure, the Bosnians' hearts, in response, grew hard. After several years of massacre in Sarajevo, Bosnian snipers returned the favor and began to target Serbian civilians.

Without doubt, the Serbs' sniper campaign was instrumental in creating the upward spiral of violence that gripped Sarajevo. With every pull of the trigger, with every woman that fell screaming to the pavement in Sniper's Alley, the Serbs killed more than just people - they killed tolerance, they killed moderation. Maybe that is why the Bosnians began to turn to militant, Muslim extremist groups for support. Consequently, during a mutual exchange of bodies in the winter of 1993 in Sarajevo, the Serbs received twenty-six decapitated bodies - their heads hacked clean off.

And when NATO forces raided a ski chalet twenty miles west of Sarajevo in February 1996, they captured three Iranian intelligence officers. The raiding forces also found RPGs, suppressed sniper rifles, pictures of Iran’s late Ayatollah Khomeini, and quantities of detonators, blasting caps, and high explosives. Most disturbing of all, the French found bombs built into children’s toys, including a red plastic toy car, a helicopter, and an ice cream cone.

Above, the Bosnian Army’s 7th Muslim Brigade marches in review (1995). The *El Mudzahid* battalion consisting of foreign fighters fell under the 7th. Some Bosnian mujahideen were from Afghanistan with Al Qaeda affiliation to include two who were hijackers on 9/11.

The Serbs began their war against Bosnia and the siege of Sarajevo under the pretext that the Bosnian Muslims were extremists who hated the Serbs because they were Orthodox Christians. The Serb leadership sold a bill of goods to the Serbian people saying Bosnian Muslims always had, and always would, oppress the Serbs living in Bosnia. These lies, spoken from the lips of virulent Serb nationalists like Slobodon Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic, built the foundation of hatred that enabled the Serbs’ bloody sniper campaign in Sarajevo. Ultimately, the Serbs twisted Sarajevo’s mixed and tolerant society into the very image they lied about to justify the war in the first place.

Chapter 17

The Chechen Wolves

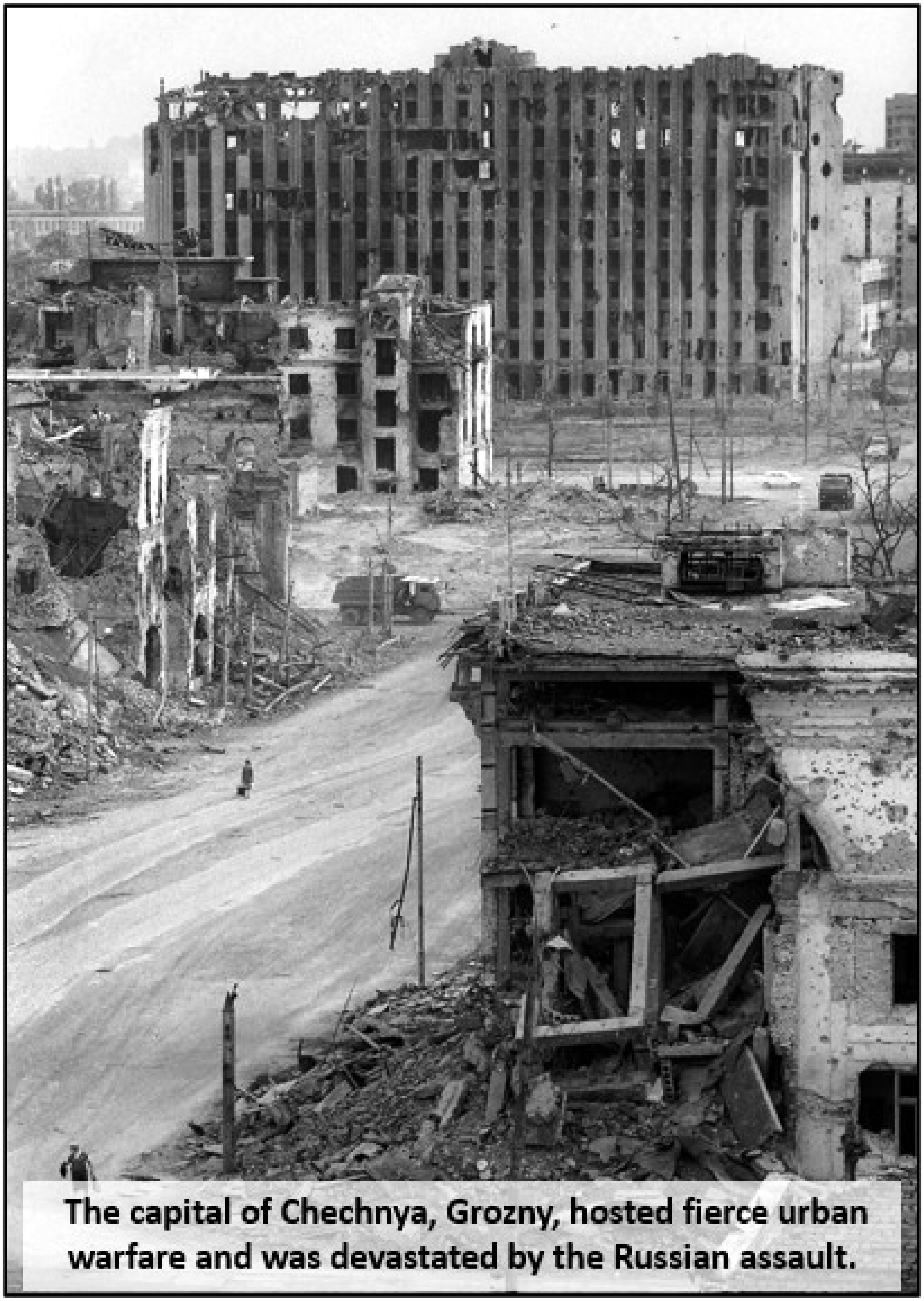
> *Every nation has the right to their fate. Russia has taken away this right from the Chechens and today we want to reclaim these rights, which Allah has given us, in the same way he has given it to other nations. Allah has given us the right of freedom and the right to choose our destiny. And the Russian occupiers have flooded our land with our children's blood.*
>
> *- Moscow Theater Siege, October 2002*

Chechnya and Russia: A Bloody History

The Chechens and Russians began spilling each other's blood as far back as the 18th Century when an expanding Russian state clawed its way southward, into the Caucasus region on Russia's southern border. Russia's Tsars desperately wanted a warm water port, needed a land buffer against the still powerful Ottoman and Persian Empires, and always looked to fill Russia's coffers by subjugating its neighbors. However, the warlike people of the Caucasus, like the Chechens, Dagestanis, and Circassians, refused to lay down for the invaders and fought a series of fierce wars against the Russian Empire for the next century and a half, from 1718 until 1864.

The Chechen people may have been defeated by the vastly superior Russian forces in 1864, but whenever the opportunity presented itself, they rebelled against the hated occupiers and slaughtered the local Russian garrisons. Consequently, when the Russo-Turkish War broke out in 1877, the Chechens rebelled. They did so again during the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, during the subsequent Russian Civil War, and then fought back against Stalin and his forced collectivization in the 1930's. Then, a sustained insurgency was fought from 1940-1944, which peaked during the time the Germans absolutely ravaged Western Russia.

But, as soon as the German threat to Mother Russia was over, and Hitler's legions were blasted back into Poland and the Balkans, Stalin immediately went to work on the Chechen problem. Uncle Joe felt no pity for the Chechen guerrillas, or the Chechen people for that matter, and reasoned there could only be an insurgency in Chechnya if the Chechens still lived there. Starting in 1944, Stalin proceeded to cram the Chechens – all of them – into filthy cattle cars and shipped them out, across the frozen mountain expanses and tundra, to Kazakhstan and Siberia. No people, no insurgency.



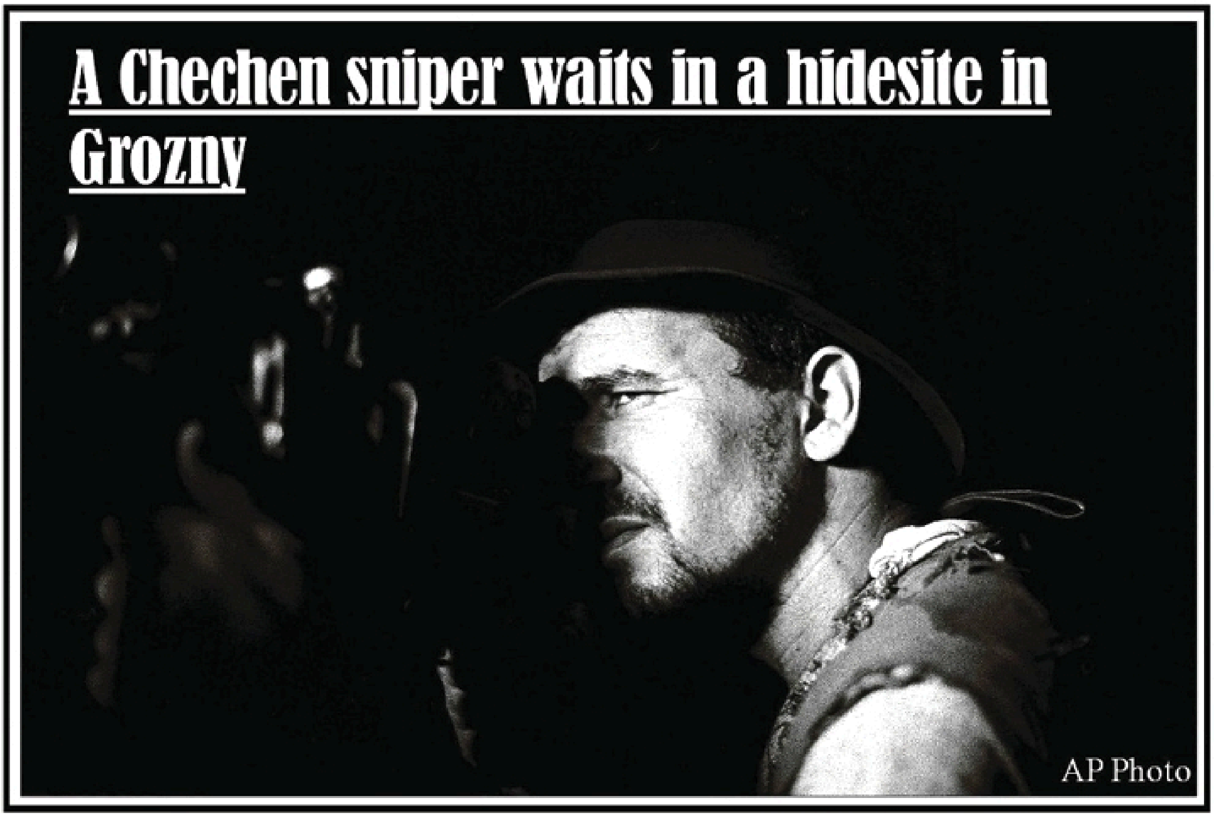
The capital of Chechnya, Grozny, hosted fierce urban warfare and was devastated by the Russian assault.

Stalin thought he solved the Chechen problem, but he only put it on ice for a few years. In 1953, Stalin was dead and his successor, Nikita Khrushchev – who was present at Stalingrad and helped promote the Red Army's successful sniperism campaign – charted a new course of de-Stalinization. In 1956, as part of this new period of thawing internal politics, the Chechens were allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild their lives, culture, and society. For the next forty years the Chechens were integrated into Russian society (Chechen children learned to speak Russian, Chechen men served in the Russian military) and lived in peace. However, one could also say the Chechens needed the four decades to recover as a people and to prepare for their next grasp at freedom.

This chance came in 1991 when the Soviet system came crumbling to the ground like a terminally unstable brick wall. As Russia peered out from the rubble, they saw the demise of the Soviet Union was a dangerous event that could lead to political instability in the region. The Russians were correct because Chechnya immediately wanted to secede. Moscow was unwilling to sit idly by while Chechnya became an independent Republic because it would set a dangerous precedent and threaten Russia's national oil infrastructure in the Caucasus. Both sides, unyielding in their diametrically opposed goals, careened towards each other like runaway trains. They were on a collision course for another war.

War came in 1994 when Russia tried, through force of arms, to prevent Chechnya from becoming independent. The fighting raged from 1994 to 1996 until Russian President Boris Yeltsin declared a cease fire and signed a peace treaty in 1997. This war was a particularly brutal one where captured Russian soldiers were decapitated and their lifeless heads propped up on wooden stakes as a warning to their comrades. Other prisoners taken by the Chechens were killed on video, their throats sliced open, their last desperate seconds of life splashed all over the internet, and the film sent to their parents' homes. A new chapter in modern warfare was written as the outnumbered Chechen rebels took a page out of the Stalingrad book and used the urban terrain of the nation's capital, Grozny (which, ironically, is Russian for the word "foreboding"), to inflict huge numbers of casualties on the poorly led, poorly organized, unmotivated Russian conscript army. In some cases, entire Russian columns were ambushed and wiped out to the last man, blown up with volleys of RPGs and gunned down by Chechen snipers who seemed to be everywhere.

The 1997 peace treaty was short-lived as Chechen forces invaded neighboring Dagestan in 1999 and were then accused of setting off several massive explosions in Russia, which destroyed a series of apartment buildings, slaughtering hundreds. With these events providing ample pretext for a second invasion, Russian forces fought their way into Chechnya again in 1999. This time, Russia was better organized and prepared for an all-out war. In a relatively short period of time, the Russian forces cleared out most of the country of organized resistance by using massive doses of aerial bombs and artillery barrages, intermixed with a liberal sprinkling of fuel air explosives and cruise missiles. By 2005, the invading Russian troops steamrolled large scale Chechen resistance but were now stuck in a low-grade guerrilla war with no end in sight. Overall, these recent Chechen Wars were costly with an estimated 15,000 Russian soldiers and up to 100,000 Chechens killed either through direct combat, exposure, starvation, or disease. Considering Chechnya had a pre-war population of only 1.1 million people, these losses were enormous.



A Chechen sniper waits in a hidesite in Grozny

AP Photo

Training and Equipping the Chechen Sniper

Despite their inevitable defeat, the Chechen fighters made combat operations in their breakaway republic dangerous for Russian soldiers as can be attested by the deluge of casualties filling the Russian morgues and hospitals. This high casualty rate was due in part to the Chechen snipers who were employed on a large scale, integrated at the lowest unit levels, and used in all their operations. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find any other guerrilla movement that employed snipers to such great effect and in such large numbers.

One reason for the Chechen guerrillas’ affinity for sniping was their embedded gun culture. Chechen men admired guns and saw them as symbols of power and prosperity. Because Chechen men loved their weapons, they were skilled in both their use and maintenance at an early age and everyone had them. This cultural affinity was further reinforced by the training so many Chechen men received when they served in the Russian military. This combination of a skilled manpower pool and the widespread availability of sniper rifles resulted in a guerrilla movement with a high concentration of competent snipers.

Also, the Chechens were a military-savvy culture because most Chechen males served in the Russian military due to universal conscription. For example, deceased Chechen President Dudayev was a general in the Russian army and subsequent (and also deceased) Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov was a colonel. Guerrilla leader extraordinaire, Shamil Basayev (deceased), served two years in the Soviet military before waging his personal, decade-long jihad against the Russian invaders. Chechnya was not unique in this aspect as other republics of the former Soviet Union, like the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, had similar demographics with many of their own citizens trained in Soviet weapons and tactics.

Training in the former Soviet army was just one way for the Chechen guerrillas to get a trained sniper; there were other ways as well. Since Chechnya was an Islamic country and many guerrilla organizations in Chechnya were explicitly Islamic in nature, Chechens were welcomed in foreign training camps like the Amir Muawia training camp in Afghanistan.

Once out of the country, Chechen guerrillas trained freely in all the art of guerrilla warfare, to include the discipline of sniping. The Russian military may have been able to hamper the Chechens' ability to train in their own country, but the Russian government certainly could not stop Chechens from training in foreign sanctuaries like Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Iraq.

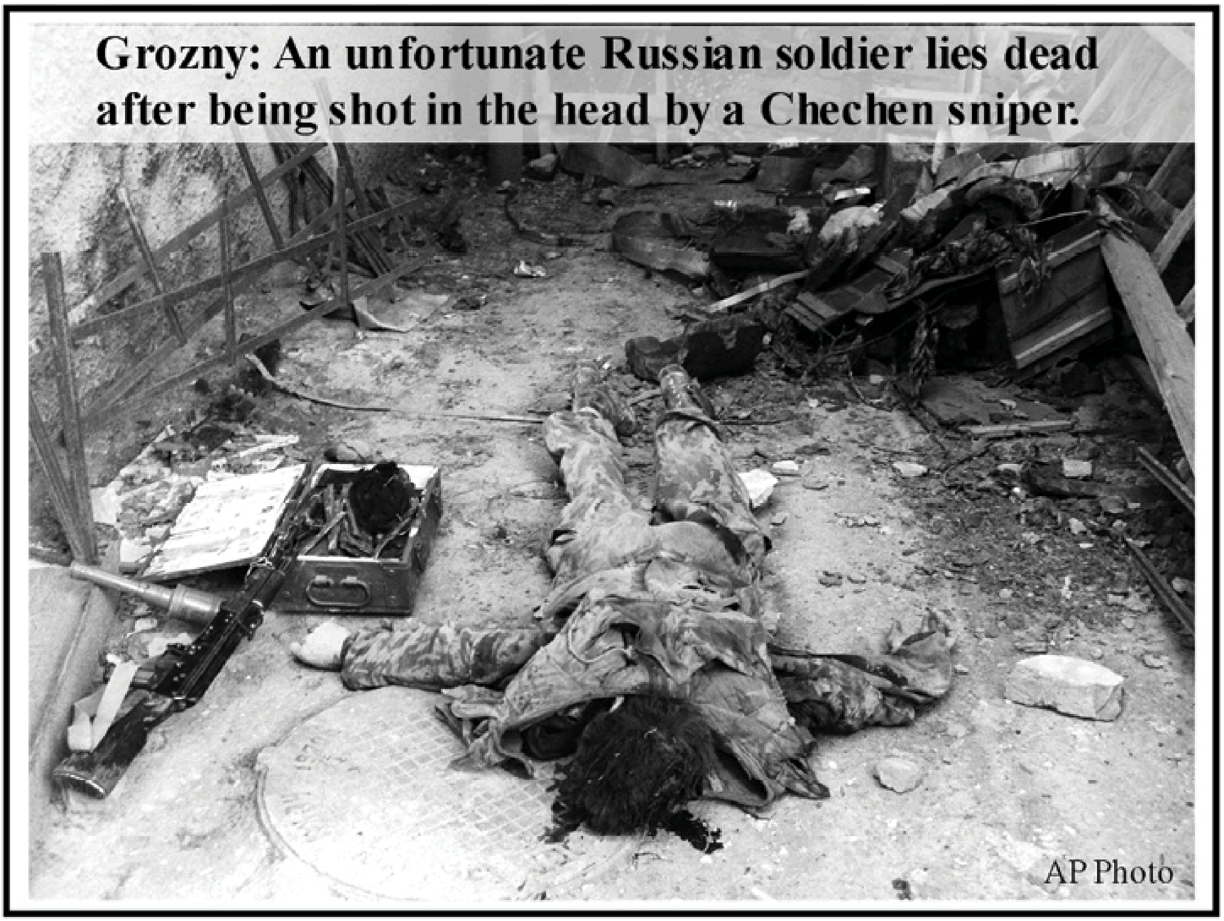
The Chechens did not always have to leave their country to get good training, they could import this training from abroad. Shamil Basayev did just this when he ‘hired’ Saudi-born Amir Khattab (a.k.a. the “Black Arab”) and his crew of Afghani veterans to come to Chechnya as “consultants” in February 1995 to train the Chechen guerrillas.

Once in Chechnya, Khattab built his own training camps, to include one called the “Training Center of the Armed Forces of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria”, which opened in September 1996. Ironically, the Russians unknowingly helped set up this training camp years before when it was created as a Soviet youth pioneer camp. Now, this former youth camp was transformed into a guerrilla university that churned out guerrilla fighters, many trained in sniping, who were bent on killing Russian soldiers.

While training a Chechen guerrilla sniper could be an inconvenience, securing good sniper rifles to kill Russians with was much easier. When the Russian military pulled out of Chechnya in 1992, they left behind some 533 SVD sniper rifles for their future enemies.

These same Russian-made, Russian serial-numbered sniper rifles, after being turned over to the Chechen military, were subsequently used to kill and wound thousands of Russian soldiers from 1994 until the present. In this respect, the Russians must look to themselves as to why and how Chechen snipers were able to cull their ranks at such a fearsome rate.

Beyond these sniper rifles left behind, battlefield recovery was another means for Chechen guerrillas to secure the most current Russian sniper rifles. Throughout the Chechen wars, Chechen guerrillas regularly captured Russian soldiers and their accompanying equipment in combat. If the Russians they captured and killed had modern sniper rifles, the Chechen guerrillas now had these same sniper weapons.



Grozny: An unfortunate Russian soldier lies dead after being shot in the head by a Chechen sniper.

AP Photo

But why should the Chechen guerrillas take the risk of getting killed or captured just to secure the latest Russian sniper rifles? It was easier to buy them on the black market, either in Chechnya or from the gun runners profiting from the war in the relative safety and comfort of neighboring Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Georgia. If the Chechens had a few thousand dollars (they had millions) they could buy the latest and greatest Russian sniper rifles in any quantity they desired. If nuclear waste and other radioactive materials could be bought on the black market in Grozny (as documented in 1992), purchasing a sniper rifle was like buying a loaf of bread.

Often, the Chechen guerrillas cut out the middleman and bought the weapons they needed directly from the source: from the Russians themselves. Since the Russian military was so thoroughly corrupt, there were opportunities to buy all kinds of weapons from the Russian officers and soldiers they were actually fighting. Some Russians had no problem making a profit to help their families, enrich themselves, or to support a drug habit at the expense of other

Russian soldiers' lives. Even former Soviet republics like Belarus contributed to the guerrillas' war chest, selling the Chechens the latest in weaponry. For the independent states of the defunct Soviet Union, selling weapons to Chechnya was a double bonus: the seller not only made a tidy profit, but the buyer promised to kill their former masters as quickly and ruthlessly as possible.

Chechen Sniper Tactics

Unlike some guerrilla movements, the Chechens believed the sniper was a key building block for a successful war against the Russian occupation forces. In fact, the basic Chechen eight-man squad had a sniper assigned to it. This organization was much different from conventional military forces, like those of America, Russia, and Britain, which do not assign snipers at the squad level, but prefer to keep them consolidated at higher levels, such as in a battalion sniper element. Because the Chechens viewed snipers as a basic asset - not a specialized tool used for high value targets or special operations - they were everywhere.

While most squads had a sniper, the Chechens were flexible in their tactics, employing the sniper at even lower levels like four-man cells organized with a sniper, a machine-gunner, an RPG gunner, and an AK-47-armed rifleman. These teams used the sniper and machine-gunner to pin down Russian soldiers while the RPG gunner took out the Russians' armor. Additionally, any number of these cells could work together as needed to engage larger Russian forces with their combined firepower. Another Chechen tactic was to employ a single sniper with a supporting four-man element. After the sniper fired, the support element distracted the targeted Russian soldiers, allowing the sniper to displace. This same support element then pinned down any Russian counterattacks whether they were armored or dismounted. The goal here was for the sniper to survive to make another kill another day.

While Chechen snipers worked as part of squads and cells, they also routinely worked in two-man teams or even independently. Working in such small elements reduced the snipers' operational signature, allowing them to slip in between Russian units and behind Russian front lines. Once a Chechen sniper infiltrated in between two separate Russian units, they could pick off Russian soldiers from different groups, enticing them to fight each other, resulting in fratricide. These small elements also benefited in other ways from operating in close proximity to Russian positions because of the Russians' own tactics. Since the Russian military was dependent on massive, indiscriminate firepower to kill these snipers, they had to kill themselves. Although it seemed counterintuitive, the more closely Chechen snipers intermixed with the Russian forces, the safer they were.

Chechen fighters pose with a Russian VSK-94 sniper rifle.

Decapitation Tactics

In their war with the Russians, the Chechens made every shot count. Consequently, Chechen snipers were savvy as to whom they targeted. When the Chechen snipers took their shot, they concentrated on high value targets like Russian officers, opposing snipers, machine-gunners, and drivers. This specific targeting was designed to eliminate the key components enabling the Russian military machine to function in combat. The Chechens reasoned if the serpent’s head was cut off, the rest of the body would flounder aimlessly.

This theory was sound since the Chechen snipers’ intentional targeting of the Russian command structure had significant effects on the Russian forces at the tactical level. Some Russian soldiers noted during the 1994-1995 battle for Grozny, there were very few platoon leaders and company commanders left to lead them.

This high loss of lower ranking officers meant Russian combat operations were disrupted from the bottom up. After all, who was going to lead a platoon and company attack for the leaderless Russian forces…conscripts and junior non-commissioned officers? The decapitation of the Russian leadership resulted in the headless Russian giant becoming paralyzed in the Grozny meat grinder, leading to even higher casualties.

This targeting of key personnel led to the January 18, 2000, death of Russian Major General Mikhal Malofeyev as he inspected his forces’ front line positions in the northwestern section of Grozny. Unofficial sources from the Russian joint command group in Chechnya reported the general was shot and killed by a Chechen sniper as he made his rounds. Then, due to the continued intensity of Chechen sniper fire in that sector, Russian troops were unable to get to him for days.

It was not until January 23rd that Russian forces were able to recover General Malofeyev’s bloated, bullet riddled body and give him a decent burial.

Chechen Sniper-Martyrs

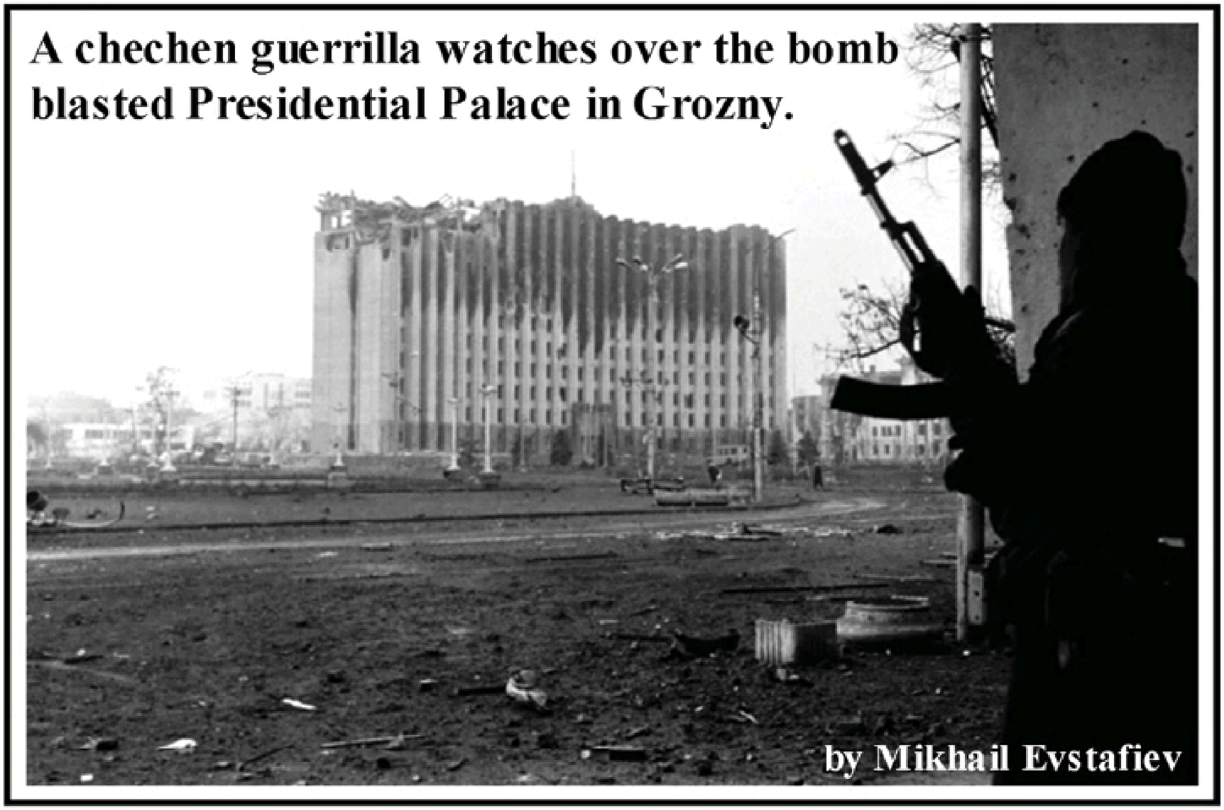
Chechen snipers always manipulated the urban terrain to give them an advantage over the numerically superior Russian forces. One favorite Chechen sniper tactic was to position themselves in high-rise buildings dominating the approaches into the city. These snipers positioned themselves deep in a room, when they took their shot they were invisible. The targeted Russian soldiers never saw the muzzle flash of the sniper killing them. These methods allowed a few Chechen snipers to pin down entire Russian units while extracting a rising toll from the Russian infantry. Because of the extreme angle the Chechen snipers fired from, the Russians’ return fire could not reach them. In addition, many of these Chechen snipers were sniper-martyrs, on a suicide mission, where they picked off Russian soldiers until the building the snipers occupied was obliterated by Russian tanks and helicopter gunships. These sniper-martyrs could not be outmaneuvered or flushed out. They had to be killed or they would continue killing.

In January and February 2000, Russian forces fought for weeks just to take Minutka Square in the center of Grozny. Chechen snipers pinned down Russian assault groups near the square for days on end, stalling the entire Russian attack to clear the city’s center. Again, Chechen sniper-martyrs barricaded in the upper stories of tall buildings had excellent view of Russian troop movements while the snipers remained invisible. Even after Russian forces called in a steady stream of air strikes on their positions, the shooters remained holed up in their sniper hides. If the snipers were located in the floors several stories down from the actual roof of the building, it took several direct hits from Russian aerial bombs to blast through the upper levels and get them.

The Chechen Sniper: A Technical Shooter

Chechen snipers in general were very good shots as one Russian soldier found out as he recuperated in a Russian Interior Ministry hospital. This soldier, with shattered leg bones, was walking at night when a Chechen sniper shot him. As any experienced shooter can tell you, making an accurate shot in the dark against a moving target is no easy feat. Also, Chechen snipers habitually made successful head shots against Russian soldiers - another difficult prospect requiring some technical ability.

In fact, head shots were a preferred tactic for Chechen snipers. At night, Russian soldiers sometimes gave their positions away by lighting a cigarette. Alert Chechen snipers would see the flame from the lighter or cigarette embers and aim in on this light source, hitting the Russian soldiers in the head or neck - most often resulting in instant death or a mortal wound.



A chechen guerrilla watches over the bomb blasted Presidential Palace in Grozny.

by Mikhail Evstafiev

Since many front line Russian soldiers wore body armor for protection, Chechen snipers learned to work around the problem. Russian soldier Nikolay Aldakov experienced this firsthand as he tried to save a wounded comrade during a gun battle. As he dragged away the wounded soldier, a Chechen sniper saw him and shot him twice in the back, in his body armor. The sniper readjusted his aim and then shot Nikolay in the legs.

In another incident, as Private Kuzin was on guard duty, wearing his assigned body armor, a Chechen sniper also aimed for his legs. Since Kuzin was standing with his arms by his sides, the bullet struck his hand instead.

Intentionally shooting Russian soldiers in the legs does several things. First, it solves the problem of avoiding protective body armor. Second, it drops a soldier to the ground, forcing other soldiers to come to their rescue who then become targets themselves. In other words, a soldier shot in the legs becomes human bait. And third, because a soldier with a leg injury cannot walk off the battlefield, it stresses the Russian’s Medical support capabilities because it takes several men to carry a wounded man long distances and will eventually require a vehicle for transport. This is an identical philosophy to the Russians’ own sport of Sambo, where combatants focus on leg, knee, and ankle attacks in order to disable their opponent. The theory is a man who cannot walk is an even bigger burden to his comrades.

To the Russians’ dismay, Chechen snipers proved capable of making long-distance shots. In one instance, a Russian OMON soldier serving in Grozny was eating an afternoon meal with his comrades when a hidden Chechen sniper shot him. The sniper was an estimated 1000 meters away when he pulled the trigger, striking the OMON soldier in the back. He died ten minutes later. At this distance, the bullet ripped through the soldier’s body before anyone even heard the gunshot. The stricken soldier’s comrades had no idea where the shot came from and they ended up trying to destroy every building in a one kilometer radius just to get the sniper. They did not know if they got the shooter or not.

Guerrilla Tactics

While some Chechen snipers operated as members of organized units openly warring with Russian forces, others lived among the population. Chechen guerrilla leader Shamil Basayev noted in early 2000 he and his men were taking too many casualties fighting the Russians one-on-one, so he ordered his men to disband and take to the villages.

In the villages the guerrillas blended in with the Chechen people so effectively, Russian units had no idea of the true number of guerrillas they were facing. Fighting this way meant many things for the Chechen snipers who previously slugged it out with superior Russian forces.

Now, the Chechen snipers had to hide their sniper rifles in or near their villages so Russian soldiers could not find them. This also meant the guerrillas could no longer openly wear the mix of Russian field uniforms they had been fighting in. Now they had to dress and lead lives like the other civilians. More importantly, the Chechen guerrillas also had to defeat the investigative measures the Russian forces used to separate them from the real civilians. A successful investigation by Russian forces was no joking matter as the resulting arrest was sure to be followed with brutal interrogations, a starvation diet, exposure to the elements, and a strong likelihood of death.

Russian investigative measures did not have to be sophisticated and included soldiers looking for bruises on suspected Chechens' shoulders. This is because people repeatedly shooting high-powered rifles (or RPGs for that matter) may get bruising from the recoil that slams the butt of the weapon into the pocket of the firer's shoulder. The Russians also used specially trained dogs to sniff suspected guerrillas for anything from gunpowder residue to traces of high-explosives. Another constant threat for the guerrilla-civilian were informants who provided information for either the Russians or the despised pro-Moscow Chechen government. These informants were motivated for a variety reasons: money, clan or blood feuds, personal advancement, religious animosity, and everything in between.

Chechen fighters run for cover in Grozny (1996).

A Strategy of Long-Term Attrition through Sniping

The Chechen rebel leadership firmly believed if they inflicted a steady stream of casualties against the Russian armed forces, the Russian domestic public would eventually tire of the war. One observer of the war noted, "While the Russians concentrated on securing territory, the Chechens aimed to inflict Russian casualties and extend the conflict. Chechen leadership sought to cause one hundred Russian casualties daily; the Chechens believed if they could continue the war and inflict high Russian casualties, Russia would eventually pull out."

For the Chechens, the widespread employment of snipers was a tool to generate this steady stream of Russian casualties. One could argue this sniper-attrition strategy was effective to a degree because a study covering the period from July 1995 to April 1996 revealed the Russians suffered up to five killed and another dozen wounded every day.

At this rate, the Russians were losing 1,825 killed and 4,380 wounded a year. However, it was believed by many close observers of the war these casualty rates were absurdly low, intentionally deflated by a Russian government desperate to keep a positive spin on the war.

A reporter interviewing wounded Russian soldiers in a hospital during the Russian drive for Grozny in 2000 found the truth about casualties to be different from the government's official statements. One wounded Russian soldier, shot by a Chechen sniper as he tried to rescue a comrade, said it succinctly, "The snipers are good. We lost many casualties." Another soldier in the same hospital said, "It's a guerrilla war now. The Chechens know the territory very well, even in territory that we've liberated. The Chechens are civilians by day but fighters by night. We suffered hundreds of casualties but then on TV they say we only lost four or five."

Arthur L. Speyer III noted Chechen snipers were the second largest producer of Russian casualties overall and when Chechen guerrillas faced pure Russian infantry units, Chechen snipers were the number one casualty producer.

The Chechen sniper campaign not only chipped away at Russian troop strength, but it also caused fear, uncertainty, and terror. Russian soldiers patrolling Grozny's churned up streets or the dirt roads in the local villages had no idea where the next anonymous bullet would come from. No matter what you did, nobody was safe. More importantly, the Chechen guerrillas' widespread and effective employment of snipers had significant psychological effects on their

Russian enemies, far beyond the immediate effects of Russian soldiers shipped home to Moscow in body bags.

The Unseen Casualties: Chechen Snipers and Russian Combat Stress

The brutal fighting in Chechen cities, like Grozny, where guerrilla snipers operated on a large scale, was the ideal environment for producing combat stress related disorders in Russian soldiers. In fact, V.S. Novikov, a Major General in the Russian medical services, researched Russian combat stress in Chechnya and published the results in his article “Psycho-physiological Support of Combat Activities of Military Personnel.” Novikov’s research was based on a sample of 1,312 Russian soldiers who previously served in Chechnya. Novikov found a large proportion of these soldiers, 72% to be exact, showed some type of psychological disorder symptom to include insomnia, depression, deterioration of moral values, and “focusing intently on self-interests and the lack of the capacity to care about others physical, moral or emotional sense, with a marked disregard for standard social values.” In other words, the war was producing sociopaths.

Novikov is not alone in his assessment as another estimate of Russian Chechen war veterans for the period March 1997 to March 1998 found that 10,000 Russian soldiers required psychological help. Aleksander Kucher, a Russian military psychologist published Life After Military Service, a study that found nearly 35,000 Russian veterans of Chechnya and their families received psychological counseling since 1996. The psychological trauma of fighting in Chechnya was so prevalent other Russian authors labeled returning Russian soldiers as murderers, rapists, marauders, sex perverts and abnormal people who could not re-enter the work force until they were “fixed.”

The Russian veterans’ advocacy group, Union of Committees of Mothers of Russian Soldiers, said as many as 50% of Chechen veterans returning from the war plague Russian society with violent crimes like rape, murder and armed robbery. One soldier interviewed for a documentary about Chechen war veterans was captured by Chechen guerrillas and held captive in a hole for six months until he escaped. This soldier was since arrested in Russia and was serving a 15-year sentence in a work camp after raping a ten-year old girl. When this soldier was initially arrested and held in jail, of the other 19 inmates in his cell, five were Chechen war veterans and one an Afghanistan war veteran.

Russian grunts in Grozny, 1995.

Female and Mercenary Snipers

A common belief among the Russian military was the Chechen guerrillas employed female snipers to kill them, such as the persistent rumor that female Lithuanian snipers traveled to Chechnya as mercenaries to hunt Russian soldiers. For example, Mr. Timothy L. Thomas' and Major Charles P. O'Hara's article on combat stress in Chechnya alluded to beautiful women with Lithuanian accents operating in Chechnya, contributing to the uncertainty of the battlefield. The Russian soldiers even gave these Baltic snipers' a name - the "White Pantyhose" or the "White Stockings." In the Chechen War documentary White Ravens, one Russian veteran of the Chechen war stated members of their unit captured a Chechen sniper that was a Baltic woman and a former Olympic shooter. When other Russian soldiers were interviewed in the documentary and asked about two Chechen women they captured, they responded they were probably snipers, despite giving no supporting evidence.

Since Russia made itself many historic and recent enemies, the Chechens had many sources of potential outside support. During the 2000 fighting in Grozny for example, Russian forces discovered they were not only fighting Chechens, but also Ukrainians, fighters from the Baltics, and even volunteers from Russia itself. One Russian soldier recounted how his unit captured a female sniper from Saint Petersburg and another sniper who was a former biathlete - both who were guns for hire.

In response, Chechen supporters say these allegations of foreign female snipers are just a convenient excuse for Russian soldiers to rape, abuse, and kill Chechen women.

Employing women as snipers is hardly a new phenomenon in the annals of warfare as the Russians themselves employed women snipers in World War II on a large scale. Women, even in Chechnya, face less scrutiny from security forces than do their male counterparts since security forces all over the world are more reluctant to physically search women and females are frequently allowed access to government controlled areas that are denied to men. Therefore, the employment of women as guerrilla snipers in Chechnya makes sense. Chechen women can identify sloppy Russian troop positions during daytime trips to the local market, then, at night, these same women can recover a hidden rifle and pick off their carefully scouted prey.

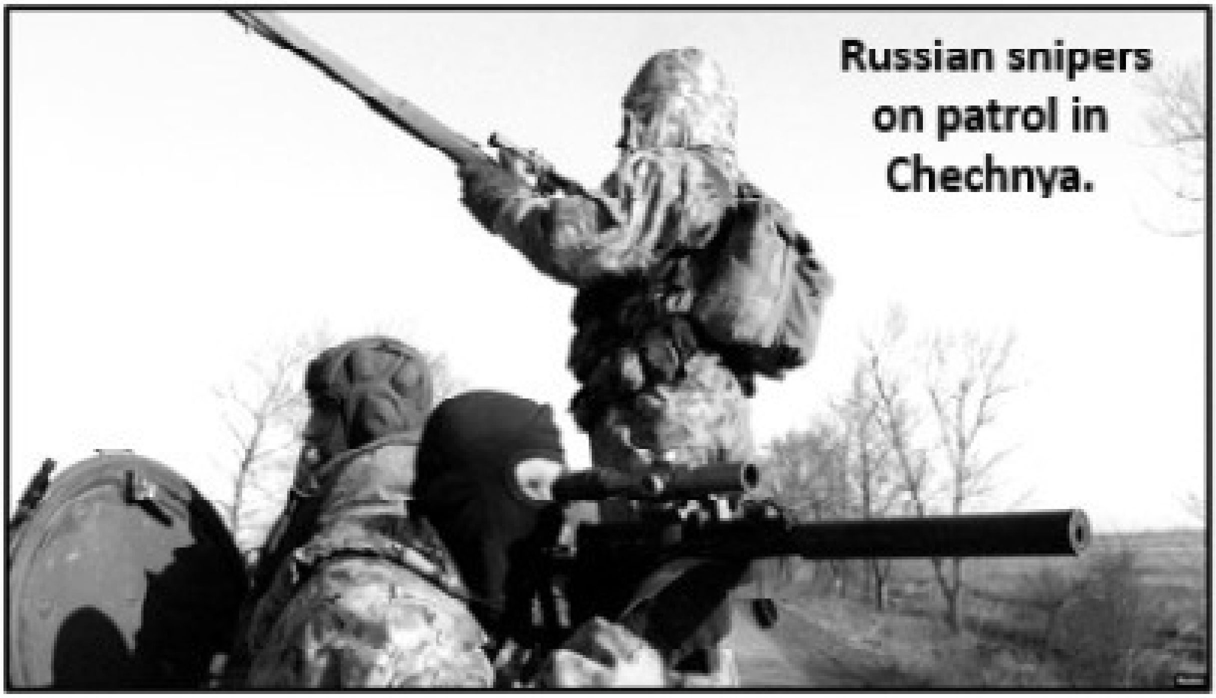
The Murder of Elza Kungayeva

If there is any question that Chechen guerrilla snipers are a source of Russian combat stress casualties, the case of Yuri Budanov removes this doubt. Colonel Yuri Budanov was the commander of a Russian tank regiment during the second Chechen war who found himself positioned near Grozny, close to the village of Tangi. On the night of March 26, 2000, Budanov and several of his soldiers broke into the house of an 18-year-old Chechen girl, Elza Kungayeva.

Budanov kidnapped Elza, dragging her back to his personal quarters where he brutally beat and strangled her to death.

While Budanov denied raping Elza, a witness saw Elza's clothes piled on the floor and an autopsy report stated Elza's hymen was ruptured and her rectum was torn. Budanov did not deny killing Elza, but he claimed she was a guerrilla sniper and killed several of his men two months prior. Budanov's defense lawyer argued Budanov only killed Elza because he was in a temporary state of sickness, in fact, he was suffering from combat fatigue.

Budanov's defense was not only a landmark case because a senior Russian commander finally faced punishment for a war crime, but because the defense explicitly linked the psychological trauma caused by Chechen guerrilla snipers with Budanov's act of murder. (Authors Note: The aforementioned Amir Khattab a.k.a. The Black Arab, later captured and filmed the execution of nine Russian OMON special forces policemen in retaliation for Budanov's murder of Elza. Then, another eight OMON soldiers were captured and beheaded as further retribution).


Russian snipers on patrol in Chechnya.

Clearly, the Chechens' widespread employment of guerrilla snipers, moving among the people in the day and picking off Russian soldiers at night, took a psychological toll on the Russian soldiers. While in Chechnya, the Budanovs of the Russian army targeted the Chechen people, but when they returned to their homes in Moscow, Volgograd, and Saint Petersburg, they directed their violent urges at their own people. The Chechen snipers' greatest effect may not be on the battlefield, but in Russian society itself where maladjusted Russian veterans, after being placed in the pressure cooker of Grozny and elsewhere, decompress through violent crime, brutalizing their fellow Russians for years to come.

Brutality as a Russian Counter-Sniper Policy

Torturing and murdering suspected or confirmed snipers, as Colonel Budonev did, was at its core a central element of Russia's counter-sniper methodology. Through these brutal methods, the Russians hoped to instill such fear in Chechen snipers the snipers would think the price of getting caught outweighed the benefits of being a sniper. The Russians' counter-sniper terror policy in Chechnya was not a new one and was really a continuation of their policies employed during World War II. This same policy of terror was used against German snipers captured on the Eastern Front where captured sharpshooters were systematically tortured, mutilated, and killed by Russian soldiers to intimidate other snipers from employing their deadly tradecraft.

One can clearly see this policy of elimination with Yuri Budanov's strangulation- rape- murder of 'suspected' female sniper Elza Kungayeva. However, Budanov's murder was no isolated incident. One Russian soldier stated, "I remember a Chechen female sniper. We just tore her apart with two armored personnel carriers, having tied her ankles with steel cables. There was a lot of blood but the boys needed it." This policy of torturing and executing Chechen snipers was easy to do when this was the prevailing mindset of the Russian military as a whole. Killing a Chechen was easy as killing a stray dog. Another Russian soldier said, "I would kill all the men I met during mopping-up operations. I didn't feel sorry for them one bit." Another soldier said, "It's much easier to kill them all. It takes less time for them to die than to grow". The policy of limited genocide practiced by the Russians in Chechnya meant executing a captured Chechen sniper was easy to do because it did not even raise an eyebrow by the Russian military leadership, which supported such practices.

Russia’s Fire-Dependent Counter-Sniper Tactics

In many ways, the Russian experience in Grozny and other Chechen cities was similar to the Germans’ experience in Stalingrad. In World War II, the German Wehrmacht was a fire-dependent force, poorly trained for close-in, urban warfare. Then, in Chechnya, the wheel came full circle where the Russian military was a fire-dependent army with its own conscript soldiers poorly prepared for street fighting. In Stalingrad, the Soviet Union depended on a skilled sniper corps and street savvy infantrymen to deal with German snipers. In Grozny, these same men were all but non-existent. Just like the Germans in Stalingrad, the modern Russian army responded to Chechen snipers, not with their own skilled counter-snipers, but with massive force.

When Russian forces confronted a sniper barricaded in a high-rise in Grozny, they attempted to destroy the entire building along with the sniper in it. There were several favorite counter-sniper tools in the Russian inventory that could be used to bring a building down. One tool was the Grad (BM-21) Multiple Rocket Launcher. The Grad had forty separate nine-foot long ,122 mm, high-explosive rockets with a range of over twenty kilometers. Once Russian forces encountered a sniper, they pulled back and called in the Grads, devastating everything around the sniper and hopefully the sniper too. Since the Grad was an area weapon, surgical precision was not possible, but that only mattered if you cared about limiting collateral damage. The Russians did not.

The Russians also used the RPO-A Shmel shoulder launched weapon and the TOS-1 rocket launcher, both which used a thermo-baric warhead (also known as a fuel-air explosive or a vacuum bomb) designed to kill people fighting from inside a building. When a thermo-baric weapon detonates within an enclosed space like a building, it causes extreme overpressure, killing everyone inside it. The flames, heat, and overpressure from the thermo-baric round fills the entire space inside a building, penetrating all non-airtight enclosures, meaning intervening walls and cover will not protect the people inside. The people are either incinerated or die from internal injuries caused by the overpressure. The vacuum created by the burning fuel ruptures lungs and internal organs, bursts eardrums, and causes blindness. Unreinforced structures hit with these devices are likely to collapse from the blast wave, which multiplies in intensity when detonated inside a building.

A Russian sniper team takes aim with their suppressed 9 mm Vintorez sniper rifles.

Anti-aircraft weapons like the Russian 2S6 also proved effective. The 2S6 was an ideal counter-sniper weapon because it was an armored vehicle that protected its occupants from small arms fire from snipers. Importantly, the 2S6 guns had a range of several kilometers - well out of the range of any sniper. At several thousand rounds a minute, the 30 mm guns could chew through concrete structures, reducing Chechen sniper positions to dust in mere seconds. Because the 2S6 was an anti-aircraft weapon, it was designed to fire towards the sky, meaning it could elevate high enough to hit Chechen snipers hidden in high-rise structures.

If the Russians could not blast the Chechen snipers with thermobaric warheads of precision 30 mm fire, they were quick to employ close air support, to include highspeed fighters with large aerial bombs and helicopter gunships armed with explosive rockets. Another favorite was self-propelled artillery because these big guns, just like the 2S6, were armored and could destroy an entire building with a few well-aimed shots of high-explosive artillery. The Russians would rather expend ammunition than their own soldiers' lives when it came to dealing with Chechen snipers. (This same philosophy did not extend towards preserving Chechen civilian lives.)

Exporting the Sniper-Martyr

The Russians' fire-dependent solutions might have been acceptable within the borders of Chechnya, but they could not be used inside Russia itself. The Chechens recognized this and tried to turn this mentality of force against the Russians by bringing the war to the Russian Motherland:

- In June 1995, Chechen rebels led by Shamil Basayev infiltrated Stavropol and took over a hospital in the southern town of Buddyonnovsk, taking 1500 people and patients hostage. The hostages were then used by the Chechens as human shields, ensuring any Russian attack would result in the slaughter of innocents. After several botched rescue attempts, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of hostages, Basayev and his fighters were allowed to return to Chechnya as part of a larger peace plan.
- In October 2002, Chechen guerrilla Movsar Barayev and a group of fighters, to include women, crossed the border into Russia and headed for the capital. Once in Moscow, Barayev took over the House of Culture, a theater in the Dubrovka district, taking more than 800 men, women and children hostage. Many of the Chechen women had explosives strapped to their bodies, ensuring any government raid would be a bloody one. Barayev demanded Russia withdraw from Chechnya. After several days, Russian forces pumped an anesthesia gas into the theater, killing the Chechens and over a hundred hostages.
- In September 2004, Chechens infiltrated the southern territory of North Ossetia, taking over a children's school in Beslan, demanding Russia's withdrawal from Chechnya. Over 1000 hostages were taken and one terrorist was filmed standing on a Deadman's switch, so if he was gassed or shot, nearby explosives would be detonated as soon as his weight came off

> the switch. Russian forces stormed the school any ways, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of children.

As these acts of terror show, Chechen rebels may export their sniper-martyr tactics as well. Sniper-martyrs would be more cost effective, as a three or four-man team could easily infiltrate the border with Russia and then move into any major city in Russia. This team could then set up in a populated, well-constructed, high-rise building in a densely populated area like Moscow. A small security team could rig the floors below and above the sniper with explosives, ensuring no assault team could get to the shooter. The shooter could then start their game of terror, targeting innocent people in the streets.

Government security troops would be forced to respond, but regular SWAT-style tactics would be rendered ineffective by the explosives. Escalating force would have to be used, Chechnya-style, forcing the government to destroy the surrounding infrastructure and population to get the sniper-martyrs. The Chechens could multiply the government's problem immensely by employing several mutually supporting sniper-martyr teams located within range of each other in the heart of the city. These tactics would be nothing new to the Chechens; they would merely be the exportation of the tactics they already used in Grozny and elsewhere.

A Russian sniper on duty in Chechnya, 1999.

Bringing a Charles Whitmanesque shooting spree to Russian cities, modified with Chechen tactics, would introduce high-intensity warfare methods to a peaceful, urban civilian setting. The resulting carnage – wreaked by thermo-baric weapons and helicopter gunships - would bring the Chechens their desired publicity, terrorize the Russian public through a horrific body count, and force the Russian military to partially destroy its own cities.

Russian Sniper/Counter-Sniper Development

One solution to the above scenario is a more discriminating approach. In fact, the Russian military community learned in part from their losses to Chechen snipers during the first 1994-1996 war and took corrective actions. A problem the Russians identified in Chechnya was their snipers were used to SWAT tactics, not to the high-intensity warfare environment they found themselves in, where the enemy employed their own counter-snipers. In the summer of 1999, the Russians re-established a dedicated, professional sniper school. The Russian snipers also started to mimic Chechen guerrilla tactics, operating in small independent teams as opposed to strictly supporting a large attacking force. These Russian snipers also came from more professional ranks, not two-year conscripts.

Overall, the quality of the Russian snipers/counter-snipers improved greatly during the Chechen Wars, giving Russian military forces an option to use a precision counter-sniper asset. It will still take years for the Russian military to train a large, skilled, professional sniper force that can affect the tide of battle. The first Russian sniper class in 1999 had only twelve students (three were later killed in Chechnya) - hardly a significant number.

However, as Russian counter-sniper competence and ability grew, Chechen snipers found that they had to improve their own snipercraft as sniper versus sniper battles became more frequent.

Chechen Exploitation of Russian Counter-Sniper Tactics

The central drawback with Russian counter-sniper tactics was their indiscriminate nature, wedded to a mentality that knew no restraint. As a result, Russian forces were unable to locate and kill single Chechen snipers without destroying the entire building the sniper was in. The Russians inevitably ended up destroying any surrounding structures and killed the surrounding population.

This meant Russian military operations necessarily resulted in enormous infrastructure damage to include a large number of civilian casualties. This near-random devastation alienated the Chechen population and made Chechnya an economic wasteland. To date, Russia has already spent billions to repair the damage they caused and will have to live with a hostile Chechen population on their border for generations.

In turn, Chechen sniper operations were designed to cause this alienation and destruction so Russian armed forces wallowed in their self-produced devastation and lived among an angry, violence-prone population. Russia’s heavy handed tactics were in themselves part of the Chechen guerrilla recruiting program where every Russian atrocity gave rise to another guerrilla fighter. Taken in this light, the Russians’ counter-sniper policy of systematic murder and overwhelming response only served to create more Chechen snipers.

Twenty years later, Ukraine put this strategy to use when they invaded Kursk Oblast in 2024. As in Chechnya, the Russians relied on overwhelming firepower which included massed artillery and glide bombs to destroy Ukrainian positions. This time, the Russian military destroyed their own towns in order to eject the Ukrainians. The invasion caused more than $8.4 billion in damages with over 120,000 Russian citizens evacuated from their homes. Based on what we knew from the Russian invasion of Chechnya, this was predictable.

Chapter 18

The DC Snipers

We are going to go to the Washington DC area and we are going to terrorize these people.

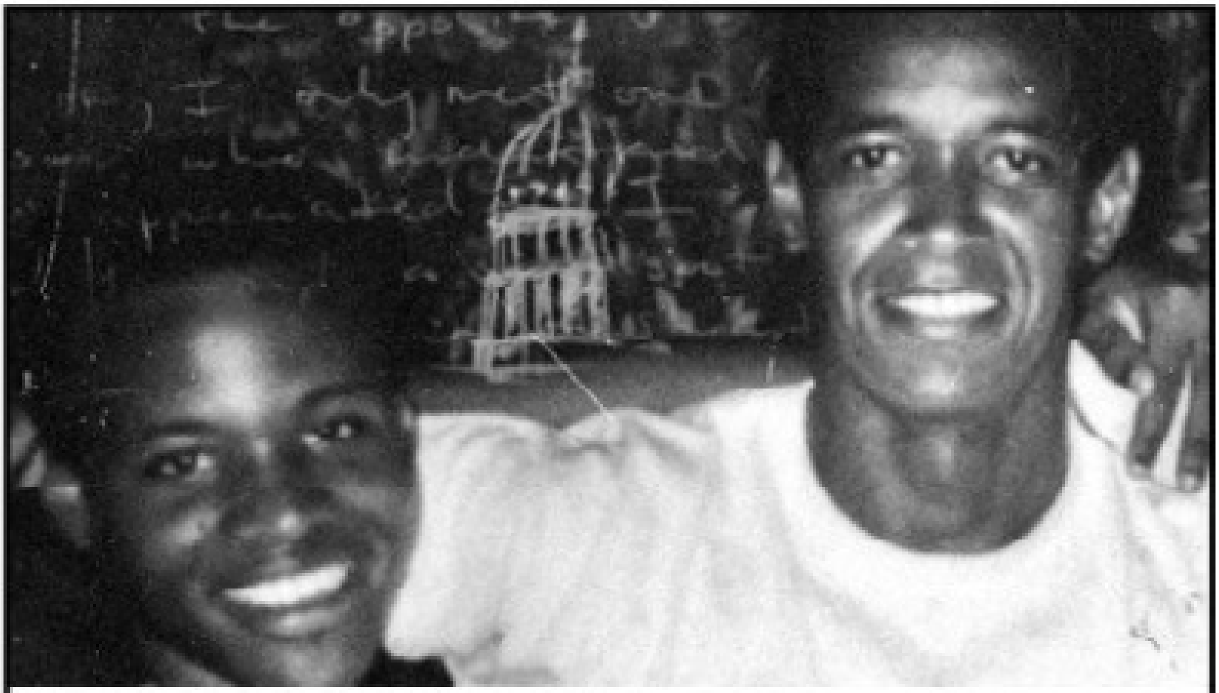
- John Muhammad

Urban Terror Perfected

As Dean Meyers pumped gas into his black Mazda Protege on October 9, 2002, he probably shivered as it was cold, wet, and a little after eight o'clock at night. The Sunoco gas station on Sudley Road in Manassas, Virginia was located in a busy commercial area, a thousand meters from Route 66. People, cars, and businesses surrounded the Sunoco and a police officer was nearby. Suddenly, a muffled boom! Was heard, a split-second before a .223 caliber rifle bullet hit Dean behind his left ear, killing him instantly. Amazingly, no one saw anything suspicious and the police officer, who was briefly in the killer's sights himself, never saw a thing. Even when the shooter was pulled over just minutes later and briefly questioned by police, they were soon let go.

How was this possible, a gunman could fire a high-powered rifle, with dozens of potential witnesses nearby, and escape undetected? How was it a police officer could be only yards away from the shooting, and then the shooter himself be questioned, but then escape? This was possible because Dean Meyers was John Muhammad and Lee Malvo's nineteenth victim and the two snipers had hit their killing stride. Muhammad and Malvo were planning and training for their sniper operation for months and they were now putting their sniper theories into practice.

During the course of their previous eighteen killings they had perfected their tactics, allowing them to evade a massive police dragnet for weeks. A closer look at their deadly methodology shows exactly how Muhammad and Malvo managed to shoot twenty-three people over a span of eight months, from one end of the United States to the other, manipulating the urban terrain, until they were ultimately captured - not because of a sophisticated law enforcement counter-sniper strategy, but because of the shooters' own mistakes.



Lee Boyd Malvo (left) and John Muhammad (right).

The Snipers' Goals

John Muhammad, born in 1960, was a deeply disturbed, violent man who was emotionally and mentally unstable. Muhammad was a Desert Storm veteran, a converted Muslim, a habitual liar, obsessed with fitness, a studied con-man, lost custody of his children to an ex-wife he hated, and, for a while, earned money smuggling illegal immigrants from Antigua into the United States. In 2000, Muhammad met a troubled young man by the name of Lee Boyd Malvo in Antigua and unofficially adopted him as a second son. Malvo, the product of an absentee father and an irresponsible mother, quickly fell under Muhammad's strong personality, soon calling Muhammad "Dad." Out of this unusual relationship of two troubled men, a sniper team was created.

There is no telling when Muhammad actually sprung his idea for a murder campaign on the young Malvo. Regardless, the killings were Muhammad's idea and Malvo was a willing tool to accomplish them. Most likely, the shootings were part of a larger plan to kill

Muhammad’s ex-wife, Mildred, who lived with her sister in Clinton, Maryland. Muhammad threatened to kill Mildred previously when she and Muhammad lived in Tacoma, Washington. She since had a spousal protection order issued against Muhammad. In fact, Muhammad and Malvo went to Mildred’s house in Tacoma to kill her, but she already moved away to Maryland. Instead, they shot and killed the unlucky young woman who opened the front door.

In Muhammad’s plan, Mildred would have been just one of a score of victims who were shot at random by an unknown serial murderer. Mildred would have been the main target all along and the other murders were just a smoke screen to cover up this fact. Ominously, Mildred actually saw Muhammad’s car parked near her house in Maryland after the killings started. Local residents also saw the same car parked several houses down from where Mildred lived. If Muhammad did not plan to kill Mildred, why did he and Malvo travel all the way from Tacoma, Washington to kill multiple persons within a mile of Mildred’s house in Maryland?

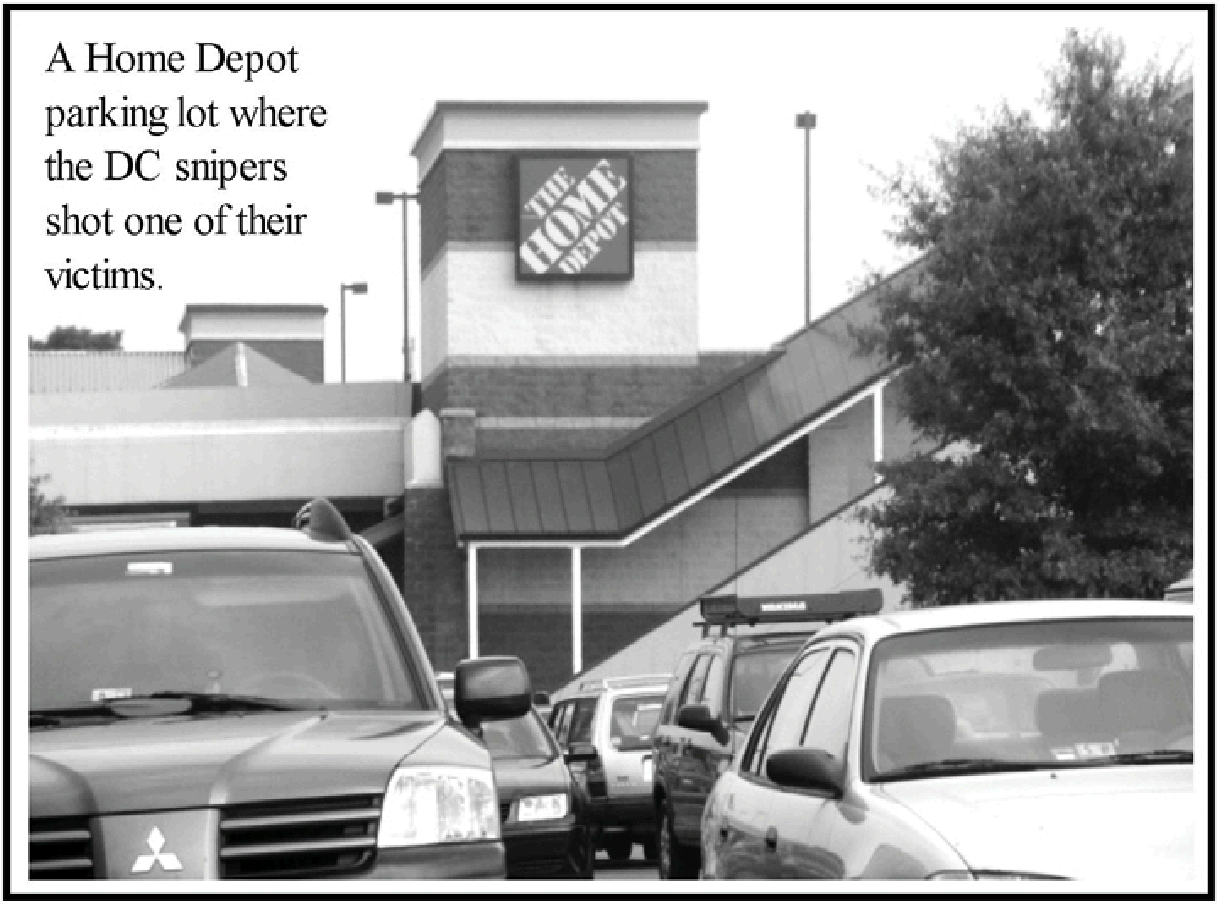
Another theory is Muhammad planned the killings to extort money from the U.S. Government since he did eventually demand $10 million from authorities if they wanted the killings to stop. An integral part of this extortion plan was creating terror among the local residents. After being captured, Malvo said the victims were chosen at random to cause maximum shock in order to spread fear. They wanted people to think anyone could be next.

Hence, old men, women, and even school children were targeted for execution. Muhammad said he wanted to terrorize so much of the populace as to affect the local economy. If the local economy started to decline, he was sure the authorities would pay his ransom.

Another theory blends several motives to answer the “why” of these systematic killings. Perhaps these killings were partially an outlet for Muhammad’s and Malvo’s seething rage for their unhappy childhoods and their going-nowhere lives. Muhammad probably did plan to kill his ex-wife but never got the opportunity during their killing spree. Muhammad probably did want to extort money from the authorities – if he could get it. It also appeared Muhammad had a subconscious desire to be caught but was determined to kill as many people and humiliate as many law enforcement agencies as he could along the way until the murderous ride was over.

Other possible reasons for the murders came to surface during Muhammad's trial in 2006, when Malvo publicly confessed what their motives were. First, Malvo heaped most of the blame on Muhammad, telling him, in front of the court, "You took me into your house and made me a monster. You fed me, you clothed me and you made me your child." Malvo said Mohammad hated America in part for being a slave state, he in fact hated all whites, and he planned to kill six whites a day for thirty days straight once their killing spree got underway. More specifically, Muhammad wanted to target pregnant white women and at one time, according to Malvo, Malvo had a pregnant white woman in his sights but could not bring himself to pull the trigger. This mass killing of whites would just be the first stage of a multi-phased terror campaign.

In the second stage, the two snipers would drive up Route 95 to Baltimore, Maryland and gun down a policeman. When friends and family went to the officer's funeral, Muhammad would have a surprise waiting. As the grief stricken mourners crowded around the deceased's grave, Muhammad planned to detonate an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in order to blow to smithereens those who came to pay their respects. Muhammad knew ambulances would quickly respond to this horrific attack and he intended to compound the slaughter by blowing up the arriving ambulances with more IEDs. Malvo even admitted they planned to massacre a bus load of school children, but Malvo fell asleep while on the lookout for an appropriate target at a gas station and missed the opportunity.



A Home Depot parking lot where the DC snipers shot one of their victims.

Mohammad was far more ambitious and his dreams went beyond merely executing white pregnant women, shooting up busloads of school children, and blowing up ambulances and crowds of grieving people. Once Mohammad conducted the first crop of killings, he intended to cross the border into Canada, escaping the United States' law enforcement dragnet. Inside America's northern neighbor, he planned on recruiting and indoctrinating up to 140 young homeless men at a remote compound.

There, Mohammad would instruct his new legion in the dark art of urban sniper-terror just like he had successfully done with the impressionable Malvo. With these 140 trained killers, Muhammad would send them across the border into America where they would wreak havoc all across America's cities. Even though Muhammad wanted to bleed the United States and get some payback for unspecified injustices committed against him, he would grant America a reprieve if the Bush Administration paid him ten million dollars in ransom.

This grandiose plan, if it worked, could have inflicted hundreds of deaths on unsuspecting Americans far and wide, from Boston to Los Angeles, Saint Petersburg to Portland. Men, women, and children would be picked off everywhere, dying from precisely placed headshots while they strolled on sidewalks, shopped in supermarkets, and lounged on their front porches. This plan also sounded like pure fantasy – the demented ranting of a delusional megalomaniac. Who was going to pay for the rent, electricity, and food at the compound?

Assuming these urban guerrilla snipers would work in teams of two, who was going to buy the seventy cars for them to drive around in? Where were the seventy sniper rifles going to come from? How was Muhammad going to communicate with these seventy separate teams? Where were these seventy teams going to get the money and credit cards from to pay for hotels, gas, and food? What happened when one of the teams got cold feet, went to the police, or were caught and interrogated, and confessed, exposing the whole plan?

Regardless of what their underlying logic was for the killings, at the time, it was impossible to discern their true motives, making it difficult to identify and locate the shooters. After all, if the two simply drove to Mohammad’s wife’s house and shot her as she walked outside to her car, it would be obvious who the police would investigate first. Muhammad would have been placed under suspicion immediately and arrested in a matter of days, if not hours.

Importantly, the extreme distance between where the killings took place and where Muhammad and Malvo lived disguised their motives. If the killings took place in Seattle or Antigua, Muhammad may have been looked at a lot earlier. Who would have guessed Muhammad and Malvo would drive across the entire country to kill people at random in Maryland? Actually, only one person guessed this, an acquaintance of Muhammad’s who suspected him only after the victims started to stack up. Ultimately, the extreme distance between the shootings and the snipers’ home acted as a giant investigative barrier, helping to disassociate the shooters from their crimes.

Training for Murder

The way in which the two trained for their sniper campaign was a veritable “how-to”’ lesson for urban guerrilla snipers. Muhammad and Malvo trained in the open and without suspicion. The two often shot, quite legally, at the Tacoma Sportsmen’s Club, where they practiced marksmanship for hours upon hours with Muhammad instructing the younger Malvo. The two also played the Xbox game Halo, a first-person shooter game that allows a person to practice tactics as well as the finer points of sniping. Video games were just another legal, inexpensive way to practice military tactics under the cover of just playing games. Muhammad also educated Malvo in sniper skills from a Navy SEAL sniper video he owned, receiving pre-recorded instruction from the special operations experts themselves. Another teaching method used was watching educational films like the movie Savior, which is about a mercenary sniper fighting in Bosnia.

AR-15 Bushmaster

The snipers used a 5.56 mm semi-automatic assault rifle for their attacks. Due to the close ranges they were firing at, the small, light, accurate weapon was perfect for their mission.

While the two future killers practiced the tactical aspects of shooting, they also led a healthy lifestyle. They worked out consistently and ate healthy. Muhammad, who benefited from seventeen years in the Army National Guard and the active duty Army, was an avid shooter, often going to gun shows. Importantly, the sniper operation was not a fly-by-night event. No, Muhammad planned the killings at least several months beforehand and looked into a variety of ways to better kill people in an urban environment. For example, Muhammad tried to build his own sound suppressor for a rifle, but it did not work. By law, any person manufacturing a sound suppressor must register this device with the federal government.

This law only works if the people building the silencer consent to follow it. Muhammad also asked a local gunsmith if he could modify a rifle with a barrel that could be screwed/unscrewed in the middle. This request revealed Muhammad did not know much about gunsmithing as the barrel is the one place on a weapon you do not want to modify to make it shorter. The barrel may blow up at the point of connection and it would adversely affect weapon accuracy. Regardless of Muhammad's gunsmithing skills, he knew what he wanted: a weapon which was quiet and could be broken down into something concealable. In short, he was looking for a weapon designed for urban sniping.

Weapon of Choice: The Bushmaster

Muhammad eventually selected a weapon that was, in many ways, ideal for their planned killings - a Bushmaster XM-15 rifle, .223 caliber (5.56 mm), with a 16-inch barrel. The .223 Bushmaster, a near clone of the U.S. military's M-4 rifle, fires an extremely flat shooting round, capable of making accurate shots at man-size targets out to three hundred meters. The shots Muhammad and Malvo would be making were at much closer ranges, some less than fifty meters.

Their Bushmaster had a Bushnell holographic sight mounted on the top. This sight was not telescopic and was not intended for long distance shooting. It was designed for quickly acquiring close-in targets moving in low-light conditions. This description fitted many of their eventual targets. A telescopic scope was also found in the car but was probably not used often since most shots were at night and the distances from the shooters to their targets were so close. At these distances and under these conditions, a high-powered telescopic scope was irrelevant. Their particular Bushmaster came equipped with a collapsible stock. This adjustable stock allowed the shooter to extend the stock to fit the shooter's shoulder when firing. When the shooting was over, the ability to adjust the stock's length made the weapon easier to conceal, both before and after the shot, or when transporting the weapon in a duffel bag.

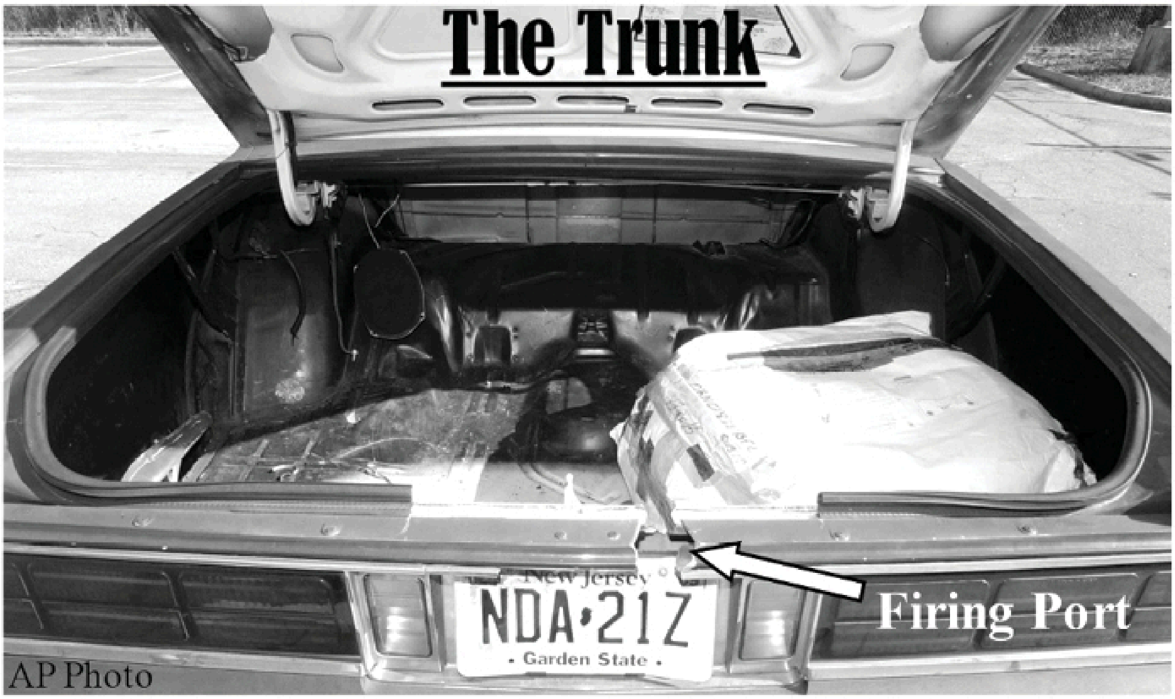
The final feature on their Bushmaster was a detachable Harris bipod. The bipod is often used by snipers because it allows the shooter to fire from a stable platform. The legs of the bipod are adjustable in length so they can be adjusted to fit the shooter and their environment. When not in use, the legs fold up against the forward handguard of the weapon, out of the way, allowing the weapon to be more easily concealed. Overall, this particular model of Bushmaster with the corresponding additional features made it an ideal urban sniping weapon.

The manner in which Muhammad secured the weapon helped the two in their killings. They acquired the weapon when they stole it from a local gun shop: Bulls Eye Shooter Supply in Tacoma. The owner never realized the weapon was stolen and never connected the missing Bushmaster to Muhammad and Malvo until they were captured by police and the serial number on the gun was investigated. Because the rifle was stolen, there were no financial records or written documents connecting Muhammad to the rifle. Until Muhammad and Malvo were captured in physical possession of the weapon, there was no way to connect the missing Bushmaster with them.

Constructing the Perfect Shooting Platform

For quite some time, Muhammad planned to use a car as a sniper platform for the killings. More specifically, Muhammad planned to shoot from the trunk of a car as a concealed sniper hide. When looking for a car to use for their operations, Muhammad looked at several cars but discounted them because the trunk was too small. Muhammad eventually focused on a Blue, 1990, 4-door, Chevrolet Caprice Classic, which he bought for only $250 from a dealership in New Jersey. From that day on, the Caprice with New Jersey tags NDA-217 became a mobile killing platform.

In many ways, the Caprice Muhammad purchased was perfect for facilitating their killings. The car’s color, a dark blue, did not stand out or attract undue attention. At night, this dark color could look like several colors like a brown, gray, green, or red. In fact, one witness who saw the Caprice at the scene of a shooting stated the car’s color was burgundy in color. From that point on, police were looking for a burgundy Caprice, not the blue one that was pulled over multiple times during the course of the killings.



Here is a view of the actual trunk that the snipers fired from. Note the firing port made just above the license plate.

Since the Caprice was a big car with four doors and big seats, it was comfortable, which was important because Muhammad and Malvo essentially lived out of the car for six weeks. The big seats allowed one person to sleep in the back while the other person drove or kept a look out. The car was also big enough to hold supplies like food, water, and duffle bags without getting in the way. Once Muhammad bought the Caprice, they modified it to suit their particular needs. First, they tinted all of the windows except the windshield. This tinting was an effective form of urban camouflage, concealing the people inside from anyone looking in. This meant people seeing the car near a shooting could not identify anyone inside the vehicle, spectators did not know how many people were in the car, and they did not know what the people in the car were doing.

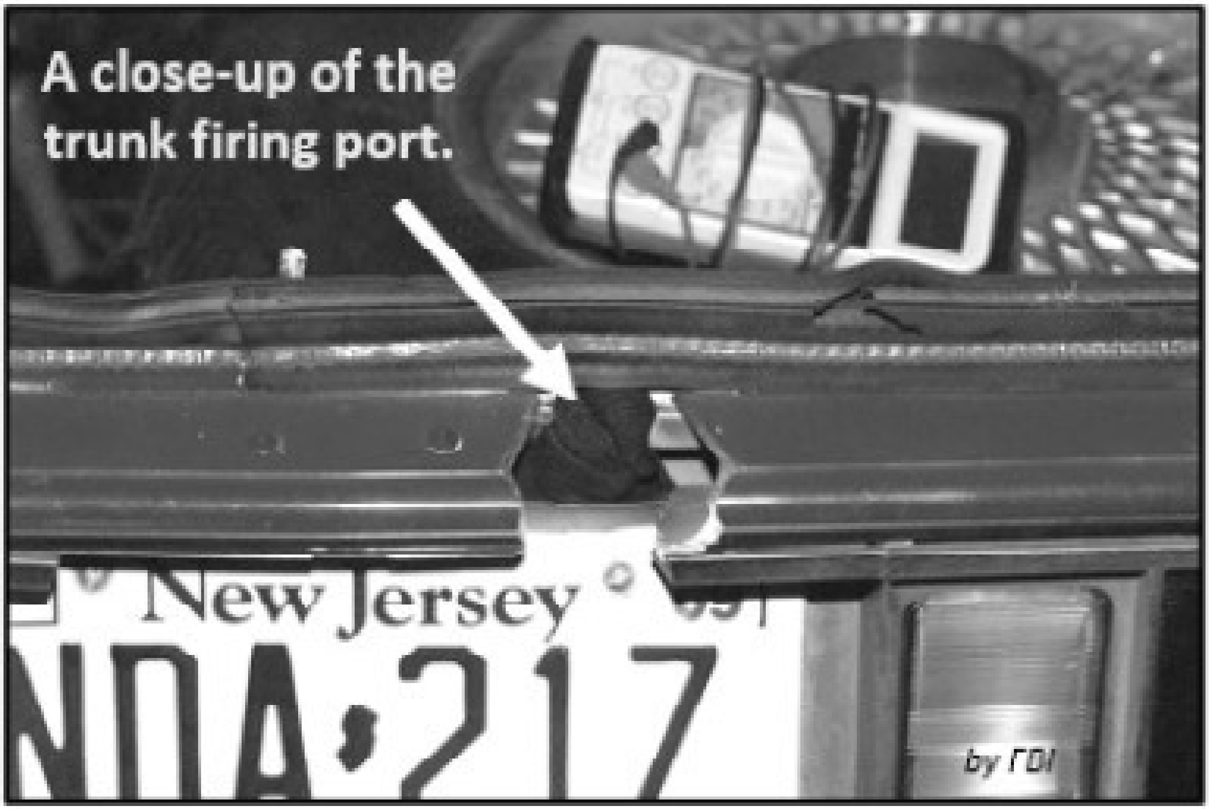
This urban screening kept the occupants of the car anonymous and helped to conceal their activities inside the vehicle.

Another important modification the two made was placing the rear seat on a hinge at the top of the seat. This was done so the person in the back seat could swing the back seat rest up and then they could slide into the trunk. Since the back seat rest swung out, away from the trunk, the person in the trunk could then come back out of the trunk, swing the seat up, and go into the back seat again. With the car's tinted windows, a person could transition from the back seat to the trunk, and back again without anyone noticing them doing this. The hinged rear seat also meant a person could hide in the trunk so when they were pulled over by police, the officer only saw a single person in the car, oblivious to the shooter hiding in the trunk.

As stated before, the Caprice was a big car with a big trunk, a trunk big enough someone could lay down and shoot from inside it. Since Muhammad planned to shoot from the trunk, he cut a small hole in trunk above the license plate. This hole was just big enough to shoot through, but small enough it did not arouse suspicion. When the firing port was not in use, the two stuffed it up with a cloth.

Shooting from the trunk, through a small hole, did several things: it hid the muzzle flash, hid any muzzle blast, and muffled the sound of the gunshot. Many people heard the gunshot, but thought it was a car's backfire, a tire exploding, or something being dropped on the pavement. No one ever saw the muzzle flash from the weapon, making it almost impossible to associate the car with the shooting from visual clues alone. From a counter-forensic perspective, shooting from inside the car kept the immediate evidence from the shot in the confines of the trunk. The cartridges ejected from the Bushmaster bounced harmlessly off the inside walls of the trunk and stayed inside. Gunsmoke did not escape the trunk and neither did the smell of gunpowder. Only the tiny hole used as a gun port connected the forensic evidence inside the trunk of the Caprice to the outside world. Due to this forensic isolation, no evidence was transferred from the trunk of the Caprice to the immediate area near the crime scene, helping Muhammad and Malvo remain anonymous.

While the slightly beat up Caprice was nondescript in almost every way, there were certain giveaways to the trained eye. In fact, some police referred to the Caprice as a 'felony car' because it looked suspicious. Their Caprice was a former police car, which criminals were known to use because it gave them the illusion of authority. Also, the tinted windows made the car look like someone was trying to hide something, such as shooting someone with a sniper rifle. The car had an overall seedy quality to it, allowing it to blend into the low-rent surroundings but it caught the eye of law enforcement personnel on many occasions. However, looking suspicious and being connected to a string of killings are two separate and distinct things.



Financial Backing & Planning

Muhammad and Malvo could only conduct their killings if they had at least some income. While most people work at a job for their money, Muhammad and Malvo shot and robbed people to secure their finances. Their biggest coup came on September 5, 2002, when they shot and robbed the owner of a local store, stealing $3,500 in cash and a $1,400 laptop. This money went a long way, helping them to purchase their $250 Caprice, it bought them food and supplies, and also paid for gas and phone calls. The two also tried using stolen credit cards, but all of the cards were quickly closed out so they never got more than a couple dollars' worth of fraudulent credit card purchases.

Because Muhammad and Malvo were dependent on stealing money to finance their killings, they increased their exposure to law enforcement. The two got away with several robberies, but committing these crimes alerted the police and risked the chance of capture during the act. During one armed robbery, police arrived on the scene and chased one person (probably Malvo) who was standing above the wounded victims, going through a purse. The gunman got away, but dropped their pistol during the pursuit, which later became incriminating evidence used against them.

Sniper Tactics

Muhammad and Malvo used a variety of successful tactics to confuse the police and continue their killing spree. One of their tactics was to spread their killings out over a large, geographic area. This separation in distance made it difficult for police to connect one crime to another. For example, the police had no idea the people killing victims in the D.C. area were the same ones who killed in Tacoma, Washington, in Tucson, Arizona, in Atlanta, Georgia, in Montgomery, Alabama, and in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. There was no common thread between the victims, no obvious motives, and no way to link one single person to these different crimes. This geographic separation became a very real forensic gulf, helping keep the crimes unconnected.

Also, the initial variety between different crimes kept Muhammad and Malvo from being connected to the separate murders. For example, Malvo shot their first victim with a Sig Sauer .45 caliber pistol in Tacoma. A month later and a thousand miles away, a man was shot with a rifle in Tucson. Five and a half months later, across the country in Maryland, their third victim was shot up close with a pistol and then robbed. Victim number four was shot nine days later with a rifle. Victim number five was shot a day later with a pistol and was robbed.

A week later and hundreds of miles away, victim number six was shot with a pistol and robbed in Atlanta. This variety in time, in weapons, in locations, and in apparent motives (sometimes money was stolen, sometimes it was not) made connecting the different killings impossible in the absence of physical evidence and eyewitnesses. It was only after Muhammad and Malvo stopped varying their tactics to intentionally spread terror in the D.C. area that they set a pattern and the different killings became tied together.

When Muhammad and Malvo planned to kill a victim, they were usually thorough. They would drive by the place of their intended attack a day prior and see if it met their needs. They would then conduct surveillance of their target area for a period of time - several hours if they were in a rush, or all night if they had more time. Regardless of how much time they had, they made sure they were aware of their surroundings and understood their immediate environment.

It was easy for the two to stay abreast of police progress against them by simply watching local television, reading newspapers, and listening to the radio. Muhammad and Malvo then combined this knowledge of the situation with maps of the area, downloaded on their stolen laptop computer, to plan their next killing. If they knew the police were focused on a specific area, they could plan a route to a less vigilant location and find a good target with close access to local highways for an immediate escape. Even though they were not from the eastern seaboard and had no previous knowledge of the greater D.C. area, their map software made up for these deficiencies.

When shooting from their car, Muhammad and Malvo faced their car away from their intended victim with the trunk of the car facing the target. After they made their shot, they slowly drove away in order to avoid suspicion. They intentionally appeared to look calm as the screeching of tires or erratic driving would surely catch a witness' attention and stick in their memory. This calm, cool demeanor worked for Muhammad and Malvo many times. Their Caprice was observed by numerous witnesses at different crime scenes, but investigators never thought there was a connection.

Muhammad and Malvo did not always fire their rifle from inside the trunk of their car. On at least four separate occasions, they shot their victims from adjacent woods. In these cases, they used walkie-talkies where one person with the car kept watch and called in situational updates to the shooter concealed in the woods. As these incidents revealed, the two could operate away from their car and use whatever surrounding terrain was available to facilitate their killings. This departure from shooting from the vehicle made the police's job more difficult because it broke the expected pattern. What good was it looking for a specific vehicle if the snipers were shooting from the woods or from a building?

Police search for the snipers at a checkpoint in Maryland.

Importantly, when Muhammad and Malvo's motives changed from killing for revenge (or money, or testing their tactics) to intentionally spreading terror, they no longer benefited from the variety in time, distance, and weapons to hide their motives and to hide the connections between their killings. Spreading terror meant they had to kill numerous people in a restricted geographic area to show they could not be stopped by the authorities.

While most of their killings were under the cover of darkness at night or in the early morning, some were committed in broad daylight in the presence of scores of potential witnesses. At least three of the shootings were done within eyesight, hearing, or close proximity to a police officer or a police station. At least one police officer was in Malvo’s sights, but Malvo chose to shoot someone else nearby. Part of their methodology of spreading terror was intentionally making shots in proximity to law enforcement personnel, showing the communities the police were powerless to save them.

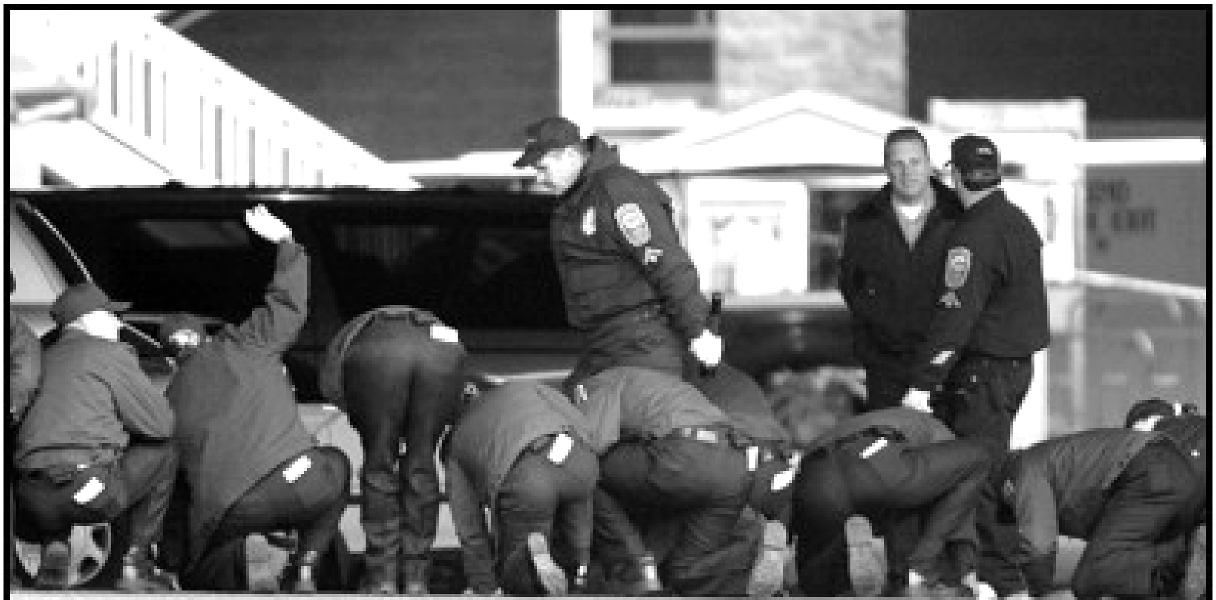
It was impossible for the police to protect everyone because there was a never ending array of targets for the two snipers to choose from, with millions of people living within a thirty minute drive in every direction of Washington, D.C. In this dense urban environment, Muhammad and Malvo ensured a steady opportunity of victims by concentrating on public places like gas stations, store parking lots, restaurants, schools, and liquor stores. People needed gas, had to eat food, and wanted liquor. All the two had to do was stake out one of a thousand different gas stations and they knew they would have an endless number of human targets to shoot. Liquor stores and gas stations were the equivalent of salt licks for deer hunters.

An integral part of their terror campaign in the D.C. area was how they killed their victims. They intended to kill, not wound, their victims and they usually tried to kill their victims with a head shot. Four of the victims shot with the Bushmaster rifle were shot in the head while others were not because Muhammad or Malvo could not acquire the target and had to settle for a different part of the body. If they had to shoot to the body, they tried to get a killing shot. Five victims received fatal wounds to their vital organs (heart, ascending aorta, pulmonary vein), two had their spinal cords severed, and one was shot in the neck. Others were shot in the lower back and some in the abdomen or stomach (more of these victims lived because of these less than fatal locations).

A reason why Muhammad and Malvo were able to kill for as long as they did under intense scrutiny by the police was their effective cover stories backed up by their demeanor. When questioned by local residents as they were parked somewhere, Muhammad would say he was traveling with his son from New Jersey and just wanted to get some rest. Since Muhammad was always polite and calm, people believed him. Even when questioned by police on several different occasions, the snipers remained calm, presenting a plausible story as to why they were in the area. Since the police had to deal with millions of potential suspects, as long as Muhammad and Malvo's stories seemed credible, backed up by a relaxed behavior, there were no red flags to single them out.

An additional piece of Muhammad and Malvo's strategy was overloading local law enforcement officials. For instance, on October 3, 2002, they killed five different people in a fourteen-hour period in Montgomery County, Maryland. Malvo later said these killings in Montgomery County were intentional, knowing the police could not handle this volume of activity.

With these killings, the police were forced to isolate and investigate five separate crime scenes, each one devouring scores of investigators, police, and security personnel. From a command and control perspective, Muhammad and Malvo hoped to overwhelm the authorities' ability to coordinate so many different investigative operations simultaneously. This part of their plan was effective because after those five killings, they managed to shoot another seven people over the next three weeks.



Police search for evidence at one of the shootings.

The Urban Snapshot

Muhammad and Malvo escaped detection by nearby witnesses on a dozen different occasions due to the nature of the urban environment they operated in. First, they drove a non-descript car, just one of hundreds of thousands in the area. Even at the crime scenes, there were scores of cars in the immediate area and the slightly beat-up Caprice was just one of many possible shooting platforms. When a shot was made, the nearby people had a second or two to observe the surrounding urban terrain before Muhammad and Malvo calmly drove off.

At the time of the shot, witnesses had a momentary urban snapshot of their surroundings. The more people, buildings, and cars that were around the crime scene, the harder it was for witnesses to narrow it down to a possible suspect. There were scores of possibilities at every shooting scene and if the witnesses happened to focus on the wrong object of interest, they missed the true culprits. Since much of the urban environment was made up of cars, the urban terrain was in a state of constant change and there was no way to freeze everyone at the scene of a shooting. Either a person picked out the Caprice instantly, or that part of the momentary urban snapshot was lost forever when it drove off.

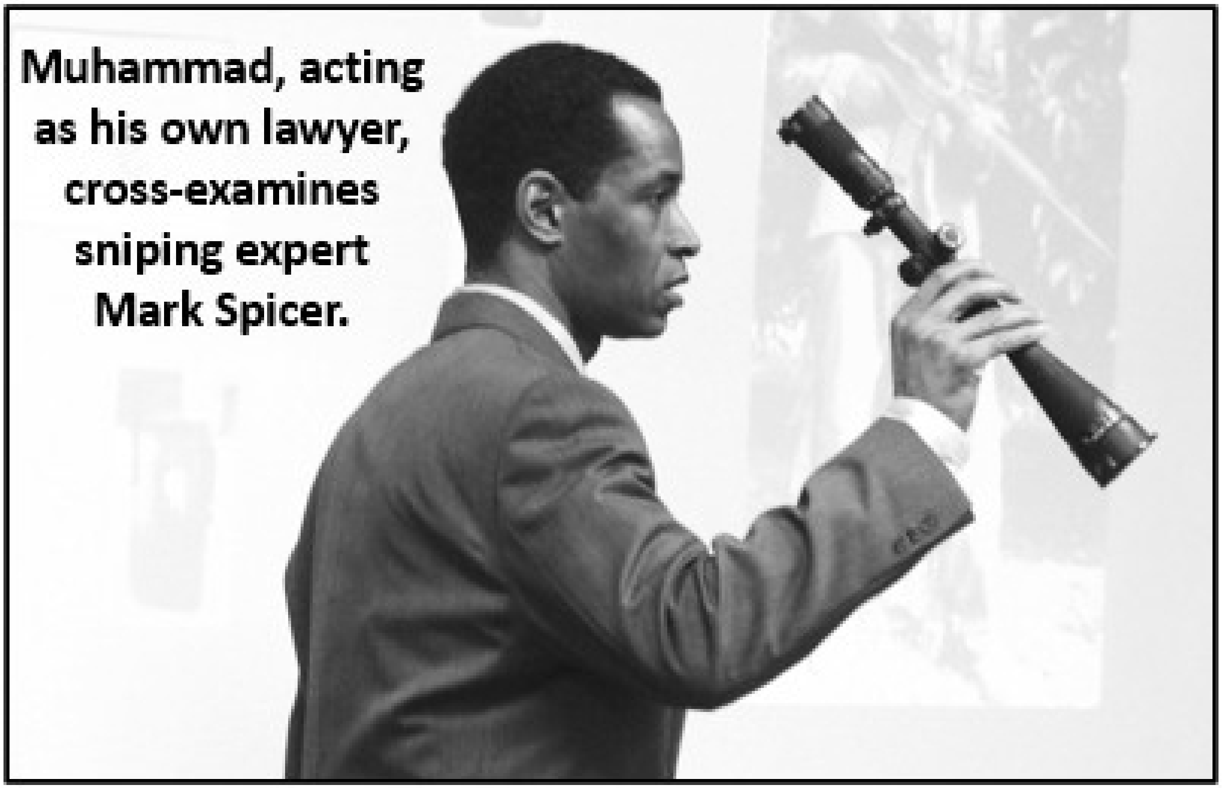
The Forensics Battlefield

In order to catch the two snipers, thousands of law enforcement personnel were employed in some capacity. The Montgomery County police took the lead in trying to catch Muhammad and Malvo, accompanied by a host of other agencies like the FBI, DEA, ATF, and the Maryland and Virginia state police. While there were plenty of people on hand to help track down the shooters, it was a monumental task trying to coordinate between the separate agencies, all with different jurisdictions and capabilities. One thing authorities did was establish a hotline for tips in order to get the community involved and have the people on the streets act as the eyes and ears of law enforcement. However, the dense urban area the snipers worked in created complications. Once the hot lines were open, authorities were deluged with a flood of calls, overwhelming the authorities' ability to effectively process every citizen with something to contribute.

Eventually, authorities set up at least 82 lines to handle the thousands of tips they got every day. In one case, the authorities found themselves swamped with 30,000 tips in a single day. One lady working the FBI tip line received 500 calls on a single shift and actually interrupted Malvo when he called, redirecting him to another number. Malvo later said they personally called the FBI hot line four times to discuss their demands but could never get through to someone in charge! Ironically, just as Muhammad and Malvo hid among the sea of cars on the streets as they killed people, they got lost among the flood of phone calls swamping the various hot lines. Fueling

this human crush of ‘helpful’ tips was a $50,000 reward Montgomery County offered, leading to the arrest of the two snipers. As the bodies continued to pile up, another $50,000 was added to the pot, and then another $100,000. A total of $200,000 dangled before the nose of any citizen who could bring the killings to an end by turning in Muhammad and Malvo. The more money offered, the more calls the police received.

While they had no hope of following up every call, the police followed up hundreds of the most promising leads. Police staked out and followed suspects, confiscated guns, fired the guns to compare their ballistics, and then gave the guns back when they did not match. The police’s job was at times hindered due to a variety of false leads reported through law enforcement channels. For example, on more than one occasion, a white box truck was seen near the scene of a shooting and precious manpower was spent stopping and searching hundreds of these vehicles. In fact, there were over 70,000 white box trucks and white vans in Maryland alone.


Muhammad, acting as his own lawyer, cross-examines sniping expert Mark Spicer.

Since people became focused on searching for a particular type of vehicle that was not the shooters', Muhammad and Malvo continued to cruise the streets in their modified, dark blue Caprice killing machine, invisible to the public and law enforcement.

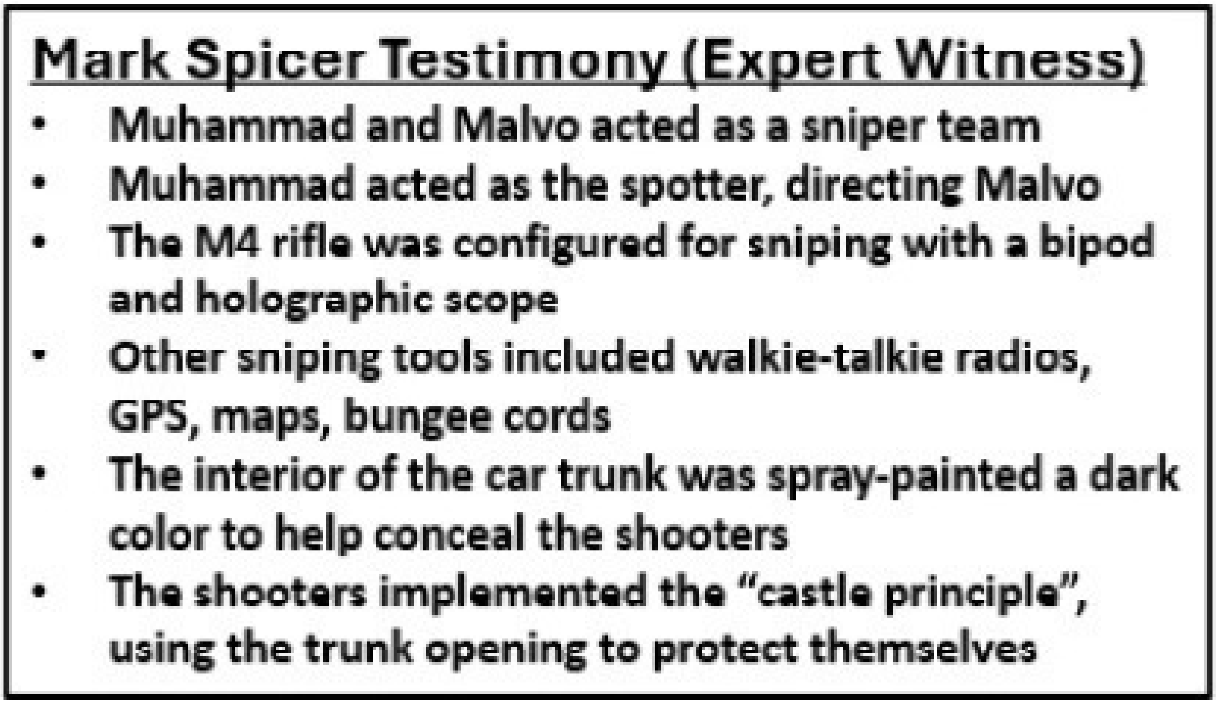
Another problem went beyond mistaken identities - intentionally misleading reports. In one instance, a supposed eyewitness stated they saw a man with an AK-47 getting into a cream colored Chevy Astro van near the scene of a shooting. This report further confirmed authorities should focus on a white truck or van instead of the blue Caprice repeatedly seen or stopped near the crime scenes. This report about the man with an AK-47 later proved to be completely fabricated and the eyewitness admitted to making the story up.

Eventually, the police got a break when they followed up a phone call from Robert Holmes, an acquaintance of John Muhammad from Tacoma, Washington. The police questioned Holmes on October 22, although he called five days earlier, saying he thought he knew who the sniper was.

This was unsurprising, considering Holmes was just one of 80,000 mostly erroneous leads. Besides, what could someone from Washington State possibly know about killings happening on the east coast? In retrospect, the groundwork for Muhammad and Malvo's capture was laid almost a year before. After all, it was Muhammad's previous criminal and violence-prone behavior witnessed by Holmes that led him to call the hotline.

The authorities quickly found out Holmes knew quite a bit about the snipers. This proved to be their demise. The two snipers were only able to operate under the noses of the people and police when they were anonymous. Once the police had two names, the game was up. These names led to social security numbers, pictures, and detailed records of both Muhammad and Malvo. Soon, the police also had the make, model, and description of the car the two were driving. In a little more than 24 hours after talking to Holmes, Muhammad and Malvo were spotted by a local citizen and captured by police in the early morning hours of October 24, 2002, at an isolated rest stop in Maryland.

Once Muhammad and Malvo's anonymity was stripped from them, they were sitting ducks. Then, it was relatively easy for the authorities to connect Muhammad and Malvo to most of the twenty-three people they shot. It was a simple task for the authorities to convict the two because Muhammad and Malvo were so forensically sloppy over the course of their killings. Part of this forensic sloppiness was a magazine Malvo left behind, with his fingerprints on it, at the scene of a killing in Alabama. Another crime scene had a map with both Muhammad's and Malvo's fingerprints on it.



Mark Spicer Testimony (Expert Witness)

- Muhammad and Malvo acted as a sniper team
- Muhammad acted as the spotter, directing Malvo
- The M4 rifle was configured for sniping with a bipod and holographic scope
- Other sniping tools included walkie-talkie radios, GPS, maps, bungee cords
- The interior of the car trunk was spray-painted a dark color to help conceal the shooters
- The shooters implemented the "castle principle", using the trunk opening to protect themselves

The police also found a small caliber pistol Malvo dropped at the scene of another shooting in Alabama. This pistol was then connected to a number of other shootings the two committed. At another shooting scene, the two left behind a duffle bag they used to conceal and transport their rifle in. This was an unintentional mistake because Muhammad was later seen buying a new duffle bag. The sloppiness continued. Muhammad left handwritten notes to the police on a tarot card and store-bought stationary and he was even caught on a surveillance camera entering the store to buy the stationary. Malvo also left behind DNA samples on a bag of raisons he ate at one of their sniper hides in the woods. At several locations Muhammad and Malvo left behind expended shell casings after the shootings.

To top it off, Muhammad and Malvo were caught with the Bushmaster rifle (lying in the trunk of their car) they used to shoot a majority of their victims with. The Bushmaster was then connected to the expended cartridges left behind and the actual bullets taken from the bodies of their victims. With all this evidence, it was an open and shut case. Muhammad and Malvo simply lacked the counter-forensic discipline to get away with their crimes. This is not really surprising, since it was their intent all along to keep killing until they were either caught or killed.

From South Armagh to Washington, DC to Baghdad

These killings show the kind of terror two trained and determined people can inflict on an unarmed community. The snipers' Caprice was the perfect urban sniper platform, allowing them to make repeated shots in broad daylight, in the presence of numerous potential witnesses and even police officers. As long as the snipers' identities remained unknown, they were impervious to law enforcement's efforts. They were swallowed up by a dense urban environment that forced police to try and find a single person and a single vehicle out of a pool of millions, which was the equivalent of finding a needle in a haystack. Malvo later claimed Muhammad got the idea of shooting from a car in a training manual written by the Irish Republican Army. (The author has been unable to locate such a manual). This may be true since we know in the 1990s, an Irish Republican Army sniper team used a similar methodology, firing from the back of a car to target British soldiers in Northern Ireland.

Ironically, while Muhammad and Malvo targeted American citizens, their urban sniping methodology was copied by insurgent snipers in Iraq and used against American soldiers. Instead of targeting and terrorizing unarmed civilians, these insurgent snipers targeted heavily armed soldiers positioned at check points and guard towers. These guerrilla snipers also shot from inside vehicles, in broad daylight, in dense urban areas, and got away with it. Every successful guerrilla sniping experience is subject to being learned by new generations of snipers. Muhammad and Malvo were just one link in a chain of sniper methodology started in Northern Ireland, imported to the United States, and then exported to Iraqi guerrillas.

In 2004, Bull's Eye Shooter Supply and Bushmaster Firearms paid $2.5 million in an out-of-court settlement as co-defendants in response to a case brought by the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence against the two snipers.

John Allen Williams aka John Muhammad was executed by lethal injection by the State of Virginia in 2009.

John Lee Malvo aka Lee Boyd Malvo is serving four life sentences in a Virginia maximum security prison. He was also given six life sentences in the State of Maryland. In 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that juveniles cannot receive mandatory life sentences without parole. In 2021, the State of Maryland banned life sentences for juveniles. In 2022, the State of Virginia denied Malvo’s request for parole. In 2024, the State of Virginia refused to release Malvo for a resentencing hearing in Maryland.

Chapter 19

Juba: The Baghdad Sniper

What has been taken in blood cannot be regained except by blood.

-A note left behind for security forces in Iraq after every Juba shooting.

Deadly Sniper or Insurgent Propaganda?

"Juba" is the name of an alleged insurgent sniper who worked the Baghdad area in Iraq, conducting a string of successful sniper attacks against American forces from the start of the American invasion until the writing of this book. Supposedly, after each of Juba's attacks, security forces found a single bullet casing left behind with a note in Arabic stating, "What has been taken in blood cannot be regained except by blood. Baghdad Sniper."

Despite these accounts, some people claim Juba never existed and was really just a fictitious character created by Iraqi insurgents who turned the myth of Juba into an insurgent hero.

Regardless if Juba was fact or fiction, in November 2005, the Islamic Army in Iraq released a fifteen-minute compilation video of Juba's alleged sniper attacks, which was available on several web sites. While this propaganda video was meant to instill fear in American forces and raise the morale of the insurgents, it was also revealing of the sniper's tactics. This video shows, from the shooter's perspective, twenty-three separate attacks. The viewer can see Juba's target for a short time before the shot, during the shot, and usually for a few seconds afterwards. There is only 30-45 seconds of film for each attack so our understanding of Juba comes from what one can glean from these various clips.

Juba's Shooting Platform

It appears Juba shot from inside a vehicle, not from a building. First, it is statistically unlikely Juba could gain entrance to an appropriate building in every one of the twenty-three attacks. Plus, there were no high-angle shots taken from upper level buildings and civilian pedestrians and cars were visible passing between the cameraman and the target in every single attack. One can only conclude the attacks were conducted at street level. And shooting from a vehicle would produce the camera angle seen in every attack and would also explain how Juba found a suitable, indeed a perfect, sniping position every time. With a vehicle, Juba could park his mobile hide site in any place providing a good vantage point. A vehicle would also fit into the city and would be an effective means of urban camouflage.

We can guess Juba not only shot from a vehicle, but most likely from a van. The camera views and angles could not have come from the confinement of a car trunk because several times we see the camera panning the surrounding area after the attack. Also, a van fit in all over Iraq and vans of every model, shape, and color filled Iraqi streets by the thousands. It was equally common for Iraqis to cover the windows of their vans with stickers, window tinting, sun blinds, and curtains to keep out the oppressive sun and prying eyes. This urban camouflage would provide excellent concealment for a sniper sitting in the back of van.

Juba Shoots from a Van like This One

Limited
BESTA

Why did Juba Target Heavily Armed Checkpoints?

In most of the video clips, Juba attacked an alert checkpoint consisting of half a dozen armed soldiers. These were definitely not considered ‘soft’ targets as Juba was not picking off lone, careless soldiers. Quite the contrary, Juba targeted enemy forces when they were alert and prepared. Why? There may be several reasons for this. First, most checkpoints were set in the same place day after day and never moved. For instance, a permanent checkpoint may be placed at a busy intersection allowing a sniper to take days, weeks, or months to plan the perfect attack. This regularity created a distinct pattern, allowing Juba to analyze his targets, study the surrounding terrain, and develop a tailored-made plan to fit a specific checkpoint at a specific location.

Also, Juba’s mobile sniper platform allowed him to get into the perfect position, no matter where the checkpoint was located. The checkpoint did not have to be located next to a building, it only had to be located in an area where civilian vehicles had access. Since all of the checkpoints in the film were located on or next to roads, Juba’s sniper van had ready access to them. Because American and Iraqi forces had hundreds of checkpoints set up all over the country, Juba had many targets to choose from. He could afford to choose a target with the right terrain, the right roads, and the right intersections for a quick getaway. If a particular checkpoint was in a bad location, Juba had other, better choices to select.

One Sniper or More?

While the insurgents would like their enemies to think they developed an unstoppable super-sniper, this was more propaganda than reality. The strongest evidence supporting there was no single super-sniper was an insurgent sniper in Fallujah who was killed after conducting a string of similar attacks against American forces. This Fallujah sniper also filmed his attacks and used similar positioning when making his shots. However, while this sniper died in action and was celebrated as a martyr to the resistance, the attacks continued. In fact, there were several different insurgent sniper films on the market, from different groups working in different areas, all filming their attacks and using similar methods.

While there were most likely several snipers conducting these attacks in the Juba film, they may have all received training from the same source. One reason to believe this is because of the common threads in the attacks filmed. In fact, each and every attack had the exact same Modus Operandi. It was unlikely several different, unconnected snipers developed this level of disciplined methodology independently.

Experts studying Juba theorized these insurgent snipers received detailed instruction from Chechen snipers blooded and experienced in Grozny. While Chechen snipers have fought in Iraq, this theory is unlikely as there are no recorded instances of Chechen snipers operating from civilian vehicles against the invading Russians. Only the IRA and the DC snipers have been known to fire from the confines of a vehicle. It is quite possible that insurgent snipers researching the art of sniping on the internet discovered this urban sniping methodology from open media sources and then began employing these tactics on their own initiative. Just as the insurgents took martyr operations, IED and car bomb attacks to new heights, they may have improved on the art of sniping in the same manner.

A U.S. marine sniper scans Baghdad for insurgents just like Juba (2003).

Did Juba Use a Gun Mounted Camera?

A point of much debate is exactly how the insurgents filmed their attacks. On initial observation, it appears the sniper used a gun mounted camera. With the majority of the shots, the camera visibly shuddered when the sniper fired a shot and in one attack, the camera was actually filmed through the sniper's rifle scope. However, a gun mounted camera could not be used in all of the attacks for several reasons. To start, when one sees the footage, we never even get a glimpse of the gun barrel or the aperture the sniper must be firing through. Several times the camera pans the local area after the shot, which would not be possible if the camera was on the gun. Furthermore, on several occasions, it appeared the camera was not attached to the gun since the gun fired and the camera remained stable and unaffected. On top of this, at other times the camera was not aligned to the target - the sniper shoots, but the camera does not show a good picture of the shot.

If the camera was separate from the weapon, then why did the camera visibly shudder most of the time? One explanation is the cameraman was collocated with the sniper, with both the cameraman and sniper concealed in the back of a van. If the sniper concealed their muzzle blast by firing within the van, the inside of the van absorbed the muzzle blast. If the cameraman was close enough to the muzzle of the weapon, this contained muzzle blast would be enough to affect the camera's stability for a split second. If the physics of this theory is true, then it may look like the camera is gun mounted when the camera and gun are really just in close proximity to each other.

Did Juba Use a Suppressor?

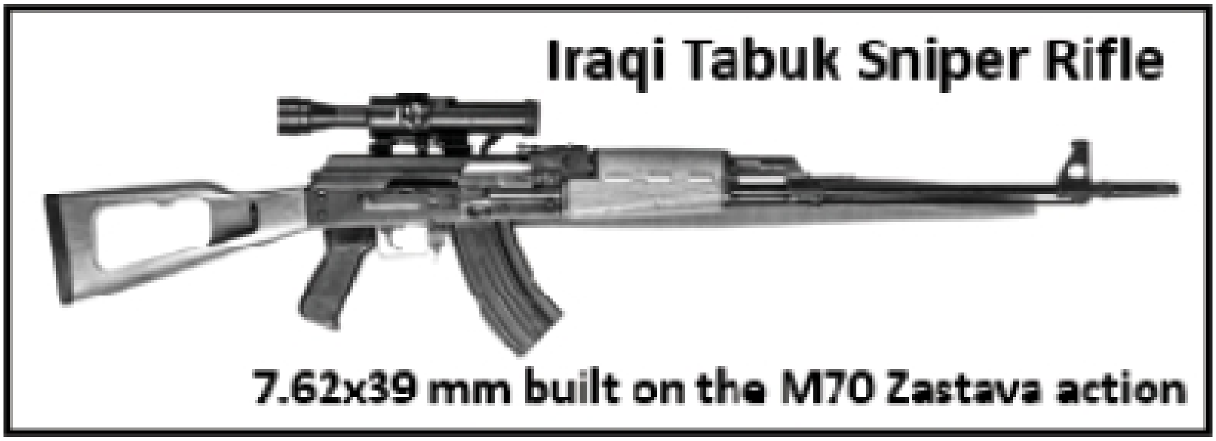
Most of the time, Juba did something to conceal the muzzle flash and blast of his rifle. In many of the attacks, Juba shoots someone who is looking directly at the sniper's position. Even after the sniper fired, the victims never saw the muzzle flash and blast. In fact, the victims often looked in a direction different from where the shot came from. One would think the sniper used a suppressor, which made the muzzle flash and blast almost impossible to see. On top of this, many times, people in the area of the shootings did not hear the gunshot. Sometimes people looked around after the gunshot while others kept on walking as if nothing happened. Overall, this presents a strong case the sniper used a suppressor for some of the attacks.

On the other hand, one of the attacks was filmed through the sniper's rifle scope and the muzzle flash from the weapon was clearly visible, taking up the entire screen for a split second. And other attacks, even though the Islamic Army in Iraq superimposed its propaganda music over the sound of the video, one still heard the rifle's gunshot. If the sniper used a suppressor in these cases, there would be no muzzle flash like the one seen through the scope and the gunshot would not be so loud as to be heard over the music. So, how was it when the sniper fired an unsuppressed weapon some of the time, the sniper's victims and bystanders never saw the muzzle flash and blast despite looking at the sniper's position, and sometimes the surrounding people fail to hear the gunshot at all?

One explanation is the sniper and cameraman used a mobile shooting range. Think of how commercial in-door shooting ranges dampen the sound of their customers' gunshots by using specially designed, foam-lined walls to absorb the sound. What if this sniper team did the same thing, except they lined the inside of a van with sound absorbing material, except for a small hole to shoot from and a port to film from? This type of set-up would explain a lot. People could not see the muzzle flash and blast of the weapon because the sniper kept the barrel of the gun inside the van and only the bullet traveled outside the small firing hole. Because the van was lined with sound absorbing material, like mattresses, people did not hear or recognize the gunshot and thus had no idea where the shot came from. Because the cameraman and sniper were sitting next to each other in the back of a padded van, the muzzle blast was constricted to an enclosed place, which rocked the camera for a split second after each shot.

In another film version of one of the shootings, the cameraman or sniper is heard saying over and over again in Arabic, 'Allahu Akbar' or 'God is great'. The speech is very clear and distinct with no background noise. There are no honking car horns, there are no people talking or yelling, despite being in the middle of a very busy city. This could because the cameraman was in the back of a padded van where everything inside this self-contained environment was heard clearly, like gunshots and their own voices, while everything outside was silenced.

In this situation, one should remember the experiences of John Muhammad and Lee Malvo in their killings. These two fired from the trunk of a car without a suppressor, in much closer proximity than the Juba sniper, and they were never detected during their shootings. It may be enough Juba fired from within the enclosed space of a vehicle and the sound of the gunshot then became distorted as it bounced off and broke up in the surrounding urban terrain, preventing anyone from locating them.


Iraqi Tabuk Sniper Rifle

7.62x39 mm built on the M70 Zastava action

Juba’s Technical Sniping Ability

The video revealed that Juba had an excellent grasp of guerrilla sniping tactics but was not a consistent shooter or did not understand the limitations of his weapon and the capabilities of his enemies. For example, it was common knowledge all American soldiers (and Iraqi security forces for that matter) wore ceramic body armor plates protecting their chests and backs. All one had to do was look at a soldier and they could see they were wearing body armor. The capabilities of this ceramic body armor are wildly known, are posted on the internet, and considered public knowledge. American-issued ceramic body armor, like all Level IV armor, was designed to stop the 7.62 mm rifle round, the round used in weapons like the AK-47 assault rifle and Dragunov SVD sniper rifle.

Inexplicably, in at least eight of the attacks, Juba shot the soldiers in their body armor. In some of these attacks Juba actually saw the soldiers get up and run away or simply bend over like they had the wind knocked out of them. Most likely, all the soldiers targeted in these eight attacks lived, with nothing more than bruising and maybe broken ribs. These incidents beg the question, why would Juba continue to shoot soldiers in the chest when he saw these shots had no effect? Perhaps he was not confident in his shooting ability and was unable to hit a harder target like a head. Or, he might have preferred to take the high-percentage body shot rather than miss a low-percentage head shot.

But this analysis does not hold up because in six of the attacks, Juba made difficult head shots. It appeared when shooting soldiers in vehicles, Juba took the head shot because that is all he had. When facing dismounted soldiers, he preferred to shoot them in the chest, even though on more than one occasion he had easy head shots available.

In two of the attacks, it appeared Juba shot his victims in the groin/pelvis region. Both of these soldiers were on foot and it appeared Juba intentionally avoided shooting them in their body armor. In these cases, Juba learned shooting his victims in the body armor was a failed strategy, so he shot where there was no armor. Shooting a person in the groin or pelvic region was still a life threatening shot because the bullet could hit the femoral arteries and cause fatal wounds to the intestines and lower spine. One report stated Juba intentionally aimed at gaps in the soldiers’ body armor, at the lower spine, in the ribs, or above the chest in order to avoid the body armor.

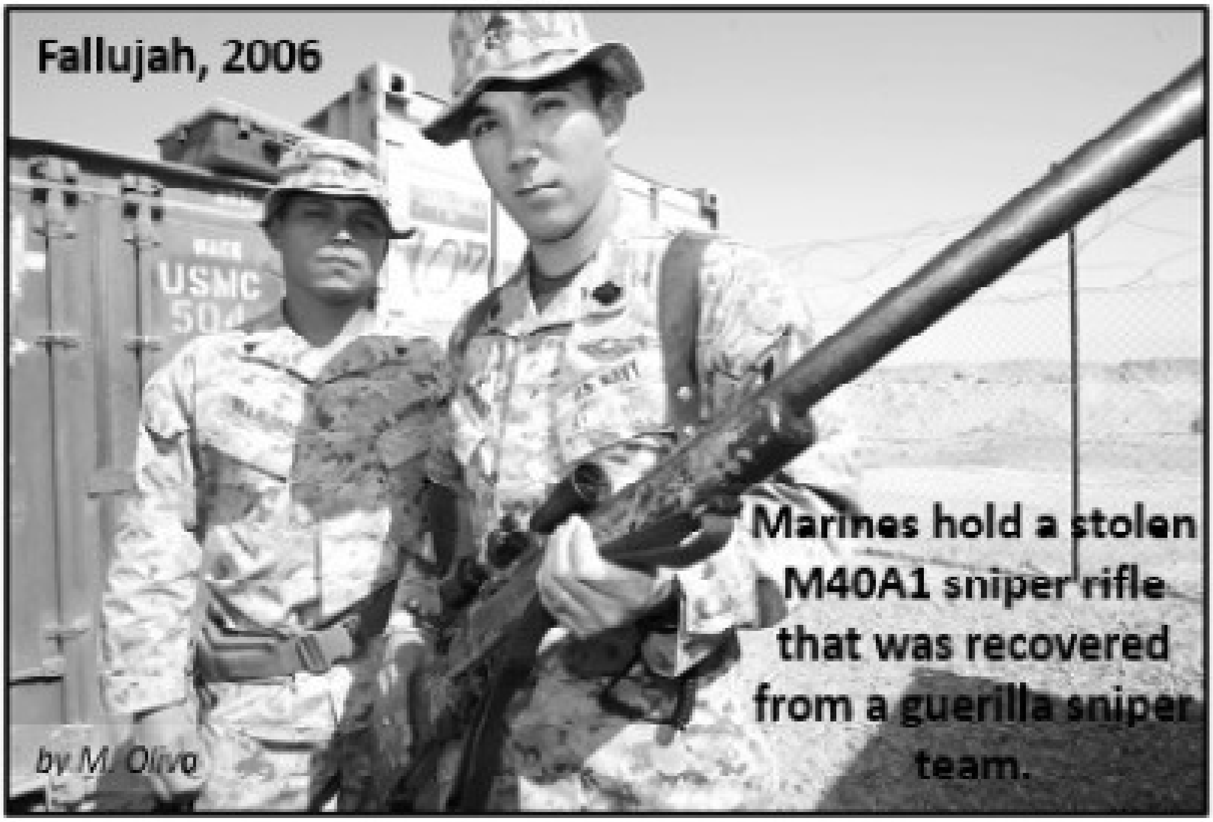
Juba may not have been an extremely accurate sniper due to his limited experience or his inability to get regular training and practice. In one attack, Juba fired at a group of soldiers and hit one in the lower arm. A trained sniper might wonder how a person could shoot at a range of 150 meters and miss. More importantly, how was it Juba could at times make difficult head shots but then blow relatively easy ones? Juba may simply have been an inconsistent shot who was hot sometimes and cold other times. He may have used open sights as opposed to a scope (although one attack was filmed through a rifle scope) and making a tough shot was more luck than skill, hence the pattern of taking easy chest shots. What is most plausible is the video is a compilation of several different snipers, all with different shooting abilities, different preferences, and different understandings of their enemy.

Juba’s Weapon

In one of the videos there was a quick snapshot of Juba’s weapon in the film which looked like a Tabuk rifle, a modified Iraqi version of a Yugoslavian variant of the AK-47. The Tabuk rifle is common. If Juba was really a team of several snipers, other shooters could have used the venerable Russian SVD which was common in Iraq. While a rifle like the Russian VSS would have been ideal for this kind of shooting, there was no evidence of suppressed sub-sonic weapon. Importantly, from the audio of the video, the weapon sounds like an semi-automatic action vice a bolt-action. The insurgents had access to bolt-action rifles on the black market or through theft but they were rarely used.

Juba’s Methodology

Juba was not an opportunist who took chance shots and rolled the dice. He was a professional sniper who developed a specific, detailed methodology for conducting his attacks. Juba’s guerrilla organization most likely had dedicated undercover intelligence agents who picked out targets for him. Juba then conducted a reconnaissance of the selected target before his attack, wearing civilian clothing, looking like everyone else. He might have first driven or walked by his targets to observe them. On these reconnaissance missions he not only collected information on his target, but he determined where he would shoot from.



Marines hold a stolen M40A1 sniper rifle that was recovered from a guerilla sniper team.

Juba intentionally picked targets in heavily populated areas with high concentrations of cars, people, and buildings. He used this urban clutter to hide in plain sight. He felt more secure the more people there were around him and the closer he was to his target. He was so obvious he easily passed the casual scrutiny of the security forces and civilian bystanders. He was not afraid to attack targets that were heavily armed, alert, or large in number. In fact, Juba flaunted his ability to take his shots undetected, right under the noses of his enemies, even with them looking directly at him and pointing their guns at him.

Once Juba found the right place to take the shot, he parked his vehicle there. He ensured other vehicles were around him so he blended in. He waited for his vehicle to become part of the urban landscape so it did not look unusual. This meant Juba may have been parked for several hours in order to melt into the background. He stayed inside the vehicle if this looked normal and he may have left it to conduct further reconnaissance and then came back to it to take the shot. Most likely, the rear of the vehicle faced the target so it had a smaller signature. The vehicle could not face the target because there was no concealment in the front of a van with a large windshield. The vehicle was probably not broadside to the target either as there was less room to maneuver a sniper rifle for a shot, plus the vehicle was more noticeable that way. With the rear of the vehicle facing the target, Juba could use the full length of the vehicle to maneuver his weapon and make the shot. After Juba made the shot, he drove away from his target and made his escape. When he could, Juba parked his vehicle at “T” intersections where he could take a shot on an exposed target and then drive down a side street and quickly disappear.

Juba did not get overly excited after making his shot and might have stayed in the parked vehicle until it was safe to leave the area. He hid his gun in the vehicle, prepared to leave the area, and may have actually walked away from the vehicle, mixing in with local crowds to separate himself from the shooting. He might go back to pick up the vehicle later on in the day or the driver took off without him and picked him up at a nearby location away from the immediate scene of the shooting.

Juba’s methodology showed a striking similarity to John Muhammad and Lee Malvo’s (The DC Snipers). They both intentionally flouted the security of their enemies and took great pride in their ability to operate under their very noses. They both wanted to cause terror, to strike fear in their enemies, and to show they could operate with impunity and could not be stopped. Juba, essentially, took the D.C. snipers’ methodology and modified it to fit the environment in Iraq.

The Integration of Sniping and Propaganda

The video compilation of Juba’s sniper attacks by the Islamic Army in Iraq was innovative in that it illustrated an integration of sniper attacks with media as part of an organized, pre-planned propaganda campaign. Juba’s guerrilla organization understood sniping was more important than just a tool for military attrition. The organization saw the sniper as a means for showing the weakness and vulnerability of their enemy as well as raising the morale of the guerrilla organization. It did not matter what the reality of the attacks were and if all the soldiers who got shot in the chest armor walked away. What did matter is it looked like these soldiers were killed, thus giving the guerrillas and their supporters the perception their cause was on the winning side. In this manner, the insurgents took the very tactical act of shooting an enemy soldier and turned it into a strategic operation.

Juba's Mistakes

Juba's tactical methodology must be given credit as a successful standard for conducting urban guerrilla sniping. We must remember Juba conducted attacks in a country controlled by the Iraqi and American militaries. Juba was not shooting from a trench or a prepared sniper hide and he did not have a quick reaction force to rescue him if he got in trouble. Juba traveled in areas controlled by the government and he had to conduct each and every attack anonymously. While government security forces could afford to hit or miss in their efforts to get Juba, he could not slip up even once.

U.S. soldiers enter a building to clear its roof of a sniper in Sadr City, Baghdad (2008).

Juba made several mistakes conducting his operations. The biggest error was publishing the film of his operations on the internet - the price paid for using his attacks for propaganda. The film allowed security forces to analyze his tactics in order to defeat them. It was obvious Juba was shooting from a vehicle and most likely a van (although other insurgent snipers had been caught firing from inside passenger sedans). It was equally obvious Juba had someone with him filming the attacks. This camera was a red flag and would become incriminating evidence when security forces searched his vehicle at a checkpoint.

Based on the perspective the attacks were filmed , security forces could easily backtrack from the place of the attacks to find out where Juba actually fired from. This alone would reveal from what distance Juba fired from and if in fact he was in a vehicle or in a building. In several of the attacks there were enough structural and positional clues in the film that backtracking from the victim would lead to the exact location of the shooter. This analysis of the film would show what kind of positions Juba liked to habitually use. Juba might not even know he was setting a pattern, but he was. Just as the security forces he attacked set their patterns, Juba in turn grew comfortable using a certain process to stalk and target his prey.

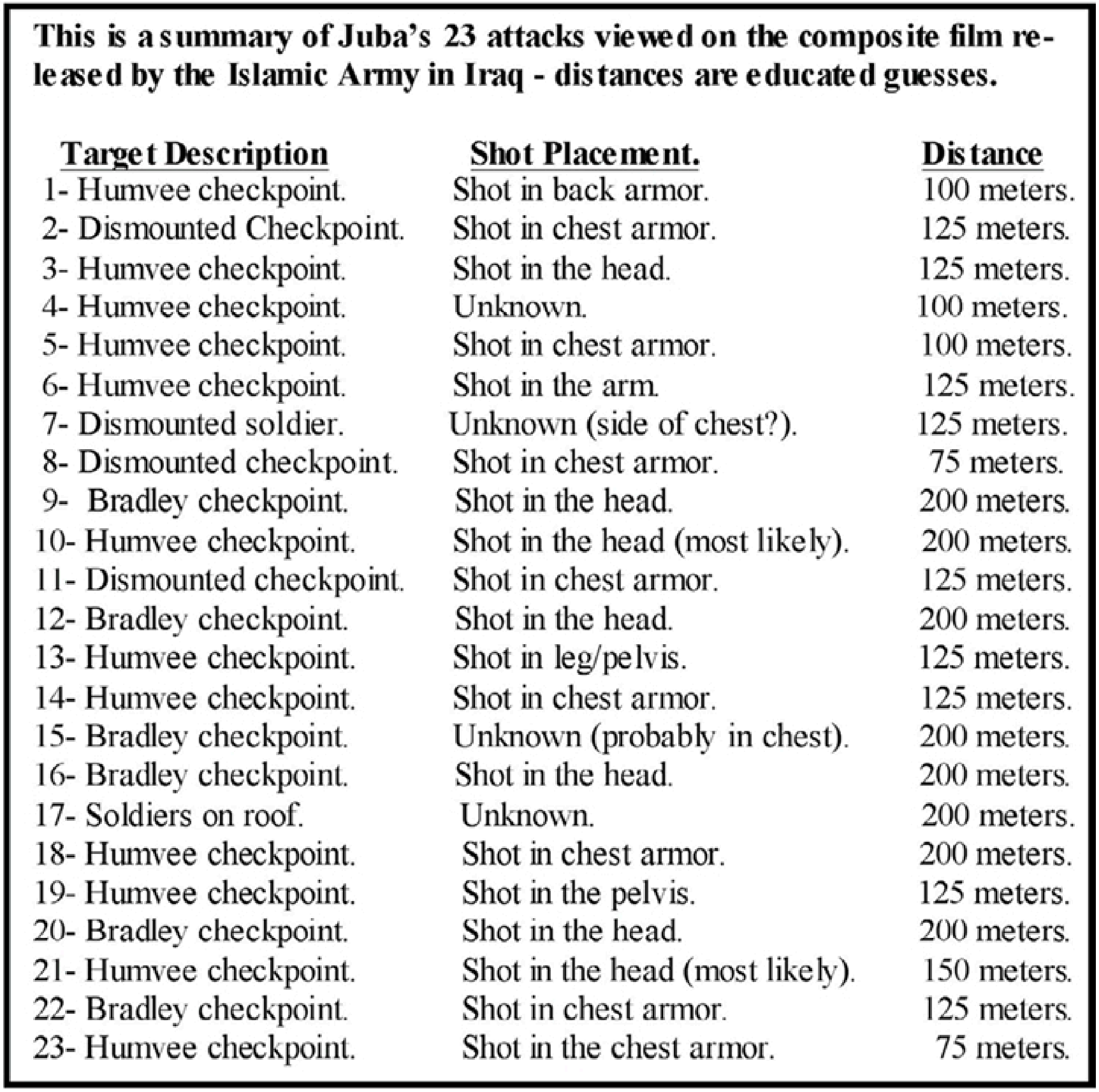
As mentioned in the Abu Othman chapter, a guerrilla sniper has a difficult time balancing anonymity and spreading the word of their feats. They cannot have it both ways. The more the insurgents trumped Juba’s exploits, the more security forces learned about him and his methodology. Even if security forces failed to get Juba himself, they might get to someone in Juba’s organization who could incriminate him. Importantly, the more security forces knew about Juba, the more they knew about his parent organization. The guerrilla organization had to balance how much they were willing to exploit the Juba myth, because they might expose the organization itself.

Juba’s Methodology Exposed

On June 2, 2005, Private First Class Stephen Tschiderer was on patrol in Western Baghdad. While outside his Humvee, Tschiderer was shot in the chest with a single bullet, knocking him to the ground. Since the bullet hit him in his ceramic body armor, Tschiderer was not seriously injured by the attack. After laying flat on the ground for a second, Tschiderer got up and ran back behind his

Humvee for protection. Having just taken a bullet directly to the chest, Tschiderer knew which direction the shot came from, enabling him to narrow down the source of the shot to a silver van parked across from an intersection, 75 meters away. Tschiderer and his patrol then opened fire on the van, forcing the two men in the vehicle to take off on foot. During the shooting, the American patrol managed to wound the sniper in the foot. Because the sniper was bleeding from his foot, it was easy to follow and capture him. The Americans also captured the other insurgent and recovered a Soviet SVD sniper rifle and a camera with a recording of the preceding attack still on it. Upon close inspection, the silver van was found to be lined with mattresses in order to muffle the sound of the sniper's gunshot. Also, a small hole was discovered in the van, from which the sniper fired from.

This certainly sounds like the same procedures Juba used and would explain the camera angle taken during the attacks. The padded van would also explain why so many times in the video a shot was taken, but no one seemed to know where the shot came from. The small hole in the van would explain why people in the videos looked directly at the sniper's position but could not see the sniper himself. The two captured men also supported the theory that one man was the driver/cameraman and the second person was the sniper. The fact that additional, similar sniping attacks occurred after the capture of this sniper/cameraman team, proved there was no single Juba, but several well-trained sniper teams using an identical methodology.



This is a summary of Juba's 23 attacks viewed on the composite film released by the Islamic Army in Iraq - distances are educated guesses.

Target Description	Shot Placement.	Distance
1- Humvee checkpoint.	Shot in back armor.	100 meters.
2- Dismounted Checkpoint.	Shot in chest armor.	125 meters.
3- Humvee checkpoint.	Shot in the head.	125 meters.
4- Humvee checkpoint.	Unknown.	100 meters.
5- Humvee checkpoint.	Shot in chest armor.	100 meters.
6- Humvee checkpoint.	Shot in the arm.	125 meters.
7- Dismounted soldier.	Unknown (side of chest?).	125 meters.
8- Dismounted checkpoint.	Shot in chest armor.	75 meters.
9- Bradley checkpoint.	Shot in the head.	200 meters.
10- Humvee checkpoint.	Shot in the head (most likely).	200 meters.
11- Dismounted checkpoint.	Shot in chest armor.	125 meters.
12- Bradley checkpoint.	Shot in the head.	200 meters.
13- Humvee checkpoint.	Shot in leg/pelvis.	125 meters.
14- Humvee checkpoint.	Shot in chest armor.	125 meters.
15- Bradley checkpoint.	Unknown (probably in chest).	200 meters.
16- Bradley checkpoint.	Shot in the head.	200 meters.
17- Soldiers on roof.	Unknown.	200 meters.
18- Humvee checkpoint.	Shot in chest armor.	200 meters.
19- Humvee checkpoint.	Shot in the pelvis.	125 meters.
20- Bradley checkpoint.	Shot in the head.	200 meters.
21- Humvee checkpoint.	Shot in the head (most likely).	150 meters.
22- Bradley checkpoint.	Shot in chest armor.	125 meters.
23- Humvee checkpoint.	Shot in the chest armor.	75 meters.

While Juba and his fellow snipers displayed some excellent urban snipercraft, they revealed enough of their methodology that a thoughtful person could see a pattern and take countermeasures. Specifically, security forces could set up a sting operation, using a patrol or a vehicle with a lifelike dummy as bait. They could then place their own undercover counter-sniper teams in the surrounding urban terrain, blending in just like Juba. Once Juba took his shot, he could be detected and put in the crosshairs while he focused on the obvious target. In a following chapter on counter-sniper tactics, the reader will see exactly how one Marine sniper team pulled off such a feat. A disciplined, talented shooter like Juba requires an equally skilled response, which begins here, with studying your enemy.

Juba Sniper Attack # 1

The target is an American temporary checkpoint on a road consisting of several Humvees and dismounted soldiers. It is daylight and the insurgent cameraman is on the same elevation as the American soldiers. The sniper’s target is a soldier standing adjacent to a Humvee with their back turned to the sniper. The soldier turns towards and looks directly at the sniper’s position, does not see anything suspicious, and then turns away from the sniper’s position. As soon as the soldier turns away, he is shot in the back. The camera jumps when the shot is fired. The soldier is then seen on his knees, but alive (he was probably shot in his ceramic body armor). Adjacent soldiers then come to the wounded soldier’s assistance and other soldiers start looking for where the shot came from, but none of them look towards the sniper’s position – they do not know where the shot came from. One of the Humvees is seen driving away from the sniper’s position, perhaps to take the wounded soldier to get medical treatment. Judging from the camera angle, the sniper is relatively close to the soldiers’ position and shot at an angle almost parallel to the road the soldiers’ Humvees were parked on. During the video, several Iraqi civilians are seen walking in front of the cameraman and they are equally oblivious to the sniper’s position. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 2

Two American soldiers are seen standing at what appears to be a checkpoint on a road, facing in the direction of the sniper. There are rolls of concertina wire visible in the background. Civilian vehicles are observed passing on a road in between the cameraman and the soldiers. The soldier standing on the right is then hit in the chest – judging from the dirt jumping from the shot - and falls to the ground. The camera jumps when the shot is fired. It also looks like the wounded shoulder sits up before being dragged off, so he was probably hit in his body armor and was only wounded. After the shot, a soldier does look in the direction of the sniper. It is daylight and the cameraman appears to be at the same level as the soldiers, for when a vehicle stops in front of the two soldiers, the cameraman's field of view is entirely blocked. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 3

Two American Humvees are parked next to each other and two soldiers with their heads visible from the roof turrets are talking to each other. The closest soldier has his head turned away from the sniper and is talking to the other soldier who is facing the sniper's position. It is daylight and the cameraman is at the same elevation as the soldiers and does not show the ground, just the upper part of the Humvees. The sniper shoots the closest soldier who had his head turned away from the sniper's position. From the film, the viewer cannot tell if the soldier was actually hit or not from the shot, as both soldiers immediately duck into their vehicles. The camera jumps when the shot is fired. The farthest soldier pokes his head up again, but the first soldier does not. The top of a car is observed driving between the cameraman and the soldiers. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 4

An American soldier is seen leaning against the hood of his Humvee, apparently at a checkpoint. It is daylight and the soldier is looking towards the sniper's position. The cameraman is at the same level of the soldiers as pedestrians often walk in between the cameraman and the soldiers. The people do not notice the sniper's position prior to the attack. A soldier walks several feet away from the Humvee and is then shot, falling to the ground. The camera jumps with the shot, but only part of the soldier can be seen when the shot is fired, as if the cameraman failed to follow the soldier as the sniper was tracking him. People are seen walking by after the shot, oblivious to the soldier being shot. Then, other people are seen running and some walking – some people heard the shot and others did not. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 5

Half a dozen dismounted American soldiers are observed congregating in a circle, talking to each other, apparently at a roadside checkpoint. The cameraman is at the same level as the soldiers. Civilian cars are seen driving in front of the cameraman and the soldiers. It is daylight and the camera film quality is hazy. A soldier walks directly towards the sniper’s position, next to his Humvee, and is then shot in the chest. The soldier leans over, towards the sniper, as if he had the wind knocked out of him. The soldier most likely took the round straight in the ceramic body armor and is only wounded. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 6

There are several dismounted American soldiers standing near two Humvees – apparently a daylight, roadside checkpoint. The cameraman is at the same level as the soldiers. An Iraqi male on a motorcycle stops and talks to the soldiers (perhaps having his ID card inspected). Another civilian walks up to talk to the soldier. The sniper shoots and apparently hits a soldier in the arm since one of soldier grabs his left arm after the shot. The camera jumps with the shot. The soldiers run out of the camera’s view. Several soldiers look towards the sniper’s position but do not shoot. The camera cuts. (Note: The sniper is using the unsuspecting Iraqi civilians as bait to distract the soldiers and to make them expose themselves.)

Juba Sniper Attack # 7

An American soldier is seen kneeling, next to a car, looking away from the sniper. It is daylight. The cameraman is level with the soldier and civilians are seen walking in between the cameraman and the soldier. The sniper shoots and the soldier falls backward. The viewer cannot determine where the soldier was shot, or if he was shot. The camera jumps when the shot is fired. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 8

An American soldier is observed standing, facing the sniper’s position. It is daylight. The cameraman is level with the soldier as passing cars travel in between the cameraman and the soldier. The camera appears to be shooting film through a telescopic sight as numbers, like those on a sniper’s scope, are visible at the bottom of the film. The sniper shoots, apparently hitting the soldier in the chest as the soldier doubles over towards the camera. The camera did not appear to jump during the shot but the muzzle blast from the rifle is seen, blurring the camera for a split second. The camera cuts. This was a close shot, maybe as close as 75 meters.

Juba Sniper Attack # 9

There is an American Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV) with its turret and main gun oriented towards the sniper's position. It is daylight and cars are seen driving in between the cameraman and the BFV and behind the BFV. It appears as if the BFV is parked on a median between two roads. The head of an American soldier is visible, sticking out of an open hatch on the top of the BFV turret. The sniper shoots, apparently hitting the soldier in the head. The camera jumps when the gun is fired. The BFV then drives off. The camera cuts. This was a longer shot, maybe 200 meters.

Juba Sniper Attack # 10

There is an American soldier sitting in the turret of a Humvee, which is parked in front of a military base. It is daylight. The soldier is facing away from the sniper. The cameraman is level with the soldier and Humvee. The sniper shoots and the soldier falls down into the turret. The camera jumps when the shot is fired. The impact from the bullet is seen impacting on the wall behind the soldier, either passing through the soldier, ricocheting off the soldier's helmet, or missing altogether. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 11

There are several dismounted American soldiers manning a temporary checkpoint alongside a busy road with various cars driving by. The cameraman is level with the soldiers and cars drive in between the cameraman and the soldiers. It is daylight. A soldier is walking along the road towards the sniper's position. The sniper fires and hits the soldier who then falls to the pavement. The camera does not jump, but some smoke from the weapon's muzzle blast is seen. Also, the camera was not centered on the soldier when he was shot. The soldier was towards the extreme left of the screen. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 12

There is an American soldier with his head sticking out of the top of the turret of a BFV. It is daylight and the cameraman is level with the BFV and the tops of cars can be seen passing between the cameraman and the BFV. The soldier is not looking toward the sniper, exposing the right side of his head and face to the sniper. The soldier then stands up in the turret, exposing his upper body and looks towards the sniper’s position. The sniper shoots, apparently hitting the soldier in the head, as the bullet impact is seen on the turret hatch behind the soldier. The camera jumps when the gun fires. The BFV with the shot soldier then turns their turret towards the sniper’s position but continues on past it. Another BFV sitting next to the targeted BFV does not show any indication that it saw the shot or the sniper’s position. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 13

There are several dismounted American soldiers standing around two Humvees, apparently manning a temporary checkpoint on a road. It is daylight. The cameraman is level with the Humvees and civilians can be seen walking near the checkpoint. The sniper shoots a soldier walking on the road towards the sniper’s position. The camera jumps. The soldier grabs his left leg and his body stiffens. Two Humvees then drive between the cameraman and the checkpoint, very close to the sniper’s position, probably within 150 meters, but show no indication they heard or saw the shot. The camera cuts. (Note: The sniper in this clip recognizes the soldier is wearing body armor and intentionally avoids it by aiming for his leg/lower back.)

Juba Sniper Attack # 14

There are two dismounted American soldiers standing along a busy road as if manning a temporary check point. It is daylight and the cameraman is level with the soldiers. Cars can be seen driving in between the cameraman and the soldiers. One soldier is looking directly at the sniper’s position and is shot in the chest. The targeted soldier immediately runs away after being hit, back towards several other soldiers and Humvees. The other soldiers showed no indication they saw where the shot came from. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 15

There are three American soldiers sitting on the turret of a BFV with the turret and main gun facing towards the sniper's position. It is daylight and the cameraman is at the same level as the BFV. The BFV is adjacent to a road, as if part of a checkpoint. Cars can be seen driving in between the cameraman and the BFV. The camera screen is hazy and may indicate a longer shot – maybe 200 meters away. The sniper takes a shot, hitting the soldier in the middle, causing him to fall backwards on the turret. The camera jumps when the shot is taken and there is a split second delay before the soldier is actually hit. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 16

There is an American soldier with his torso sticking out of the top turret of a BFV and he is facing the general direction of the sniper. It is daylight and the cameraman is level with the soldier. Cars are observed driving in between the cameraman and the BFV. The soldier begins eating a sandwich and is facing directly at the sniper's position. The sniper shoots the soldier in the head. The camera jumps. The soldier falls down the hatch and the camera cuts. (A truck is seen passing by the cameraman and then turns left, showing the sniper is situated at a "T" intersection.)

Juba Sniper Attack # 17

There are two American soldiers standing on a roof, silhouetted against the skyline and talking to each other. It is daylight and the cameraman appears to be at a level lower than the soldiers, as if he is looking up at them. The camera screen is not clear as the soldiers are further away, probably 200 meters. The sniper shoots the soldier on the left, who is looking at the sniper's position, and then falls over after being hit. The camera jumps when the shot is made. There is a second between when the shot is fired and the soldier is hit, indicating a longer shot. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 18

There are several dismounted American soldiers near a Humvee, besides a road, apparently manning a checkpoint. It is daylight, the cameraman is level with the soldiers and the screen is hazy, indicating the cameraman is about 200 meters away. The sniper shoots, the camera jumps, and hits the soldier in the chest. The soldier falls backwards into a Humvee after being hit. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper attack # 19

There are several American dismounted soldiers standing beside a Humvee, apparently manning a roadside checkpoint. One soldier is facing the sniper’s position. It is daylight and the cameraman is level with the soldier. A car is seen driving in between the cameraman and the soldiers. There is a tree branch that obscures the cameraman’s view of the soldier’s head. The sniper shoots and the camera jumps. The way the soldier falls, it appears the soldier was hit in the pelvic region, below his body armor. Two other soldiers immediately grab the fallen soldier and begin to drag him behind the Humvee. One of the soldiers looks for where the shot came from but looks away from the sniper’s position. The sniper fires again but it looks like he hits a tree that is in front of the fallen soldier. The camera cuts. (Note: The sniper loses their cool from all the activity and probably jerks the trigger, missing the group of soldiers entirely, even though they are an easy target.)

Juba Sniper Attack # 20

There is an American soldier with his upper torso sticking out of the top hatch of Chapter 17 - Juba: The Baghdad Sniper a BFV turret. The soldier is facing the sniper’s position and the BFV’s turret and main gun is pointing towards the sniper. It is daylight and the cameraman is level with the BFV. The sniper takes a shot, hitting the soldier in the head. The camera jumps when the shot is fired. The camera cuts.

Juba Sniper Attack # 21

There are several dismounted Americans standing near a Humvee, apparently manning a roadside checkpoint. One soldier is at the rear of vehicle facing towards the sniper's position. It is daylight and the cameraman is level with the soldier. There are civilians visible walking near the checkpoint. The sniper shoots, apparently hitting the soldier in the head, and the soldier falls to the ground. The soldier on the Humvee's turret mounted machine-gun looks around but never looks towards the sniper's position. Another soldier is standing on the side of the Humvee and is apparently unaware the other soldier was shot. Some civilians walking by show they heard the gunshot. Others walk by as if they did not hear the gunshot. None of them look towards the sniper's position. The camera cuts. (Note: In some of these film clips the sniper must be using a sound suppressor as people who are right near the shooting never hear the gunshot.)

Juba Sniper Attack # 22

There is a dismounted American soldier standing next to a BFV, apparently manning a roadside checkpoint. It is daylight and the cameraman is level with the soldier. Cars can be seen driving between the cameraman and the soldier. The sniper shoots and the camera jumps. Judging from the way the soldier doubled over and fell, he was hit in the chest. A civilian runs away after the shot is fired. The camera cuts. (Note: Now that we are into the 22nd attack, it is difficult to understand why the sniper is still shooting their targets square in the body armor, especially after so many other soldiers who were previously shot in the same place simply ran away, unharmed.)

Juba Sniper Attack #23 (PFC Stephen Tschiderer Attack)

PFC Tschiderer is dismounted and standing next to a Humvee, apparently manning a checkpoint. It is daylight and the cameraman is level with the soldiers. PFC Tschiderer is standing and looking towards the sniper's position. The sniper shoots, hitting the PFC Tschiderer in the chest. The camera jumps. PFC Tschiderer falls backwards onto the pavement. The camera cuts.

Aftermath

A total of four sniper videos were released with the last one being in 2008. The halt in production was probably from a combination of reasons like the snipers themselves being captured or killed, other parts of the organization being disrupted, and the overall success of U.S. and Iraqi government counterinsurgency policy over time. Importantly, the U.S. continuously improved and evolved its own sniper and counter-sniper capability and trained the Iraqi security forces to do the same. This meant the operational environment became more difficult for a shooter like Juba.

As an example of the U.S. counter-sniper competence we can read Chris Kyle's Silver Star citation covering the period from April to August 2006. "During 32 sniper overwatch missions, he personally accounted for 91 confirmed enemy fighters killed and dozens more probably killed or wounded. His engagements directly prevented casualties to U.S. and Iraqi Forces on more than 30 occasions, including enemy rocket-propelled grenade and mortar teams eliminated, **five enemy snipers with scoped weapons eliminated,** and dozens of insurgent fighters destroyed while actively engaging U.S. and Iraqi forces with small arms."

Also, in 2007, three Iraqi men were captured in a van with two sniper rifles, a suppressor, and a video camera with several previous shootings still saved on the camera. There was a hidden compartment for the weapons and a hole in the rear of the van to shoot from. The three were convicted of killing two U.S. soldiers and wounding nine others over the course of two months. While two of the men were convicted of the shootings and one of being the driver, all three were sentenced to death.

Chapter 20

The Syrian Civil War

A Patchwork Country, Ripped Apart

The Syrian Civil War began in March 2011 when pro-democracy protests erupted against Basha al-Assad’s regime and the government responded with escalating violence including mass arrests, torture, and executions. Several months later, an armed insurgency developed with creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) composed primarily of defecting army troops. Rebel forces, which included ethnic Kurds, eventually received weapons and support from Turkey, Qatar, and the U.S., allowing them to seize large swaths of territory.

In order to prop up their faltering ally, Iran immediately began providing support to Assad by sending tens of thousands of IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps) troops. In neighboring Lebanon, Hezbollah also provided thousands of men and was involved in direct combat operations, mainly in the border areas. With this help, the Syrian government began to get the upper hand until the creation of ISIS (Islamic state in Iraq and Syria) which took over large parts of the country in 2013.

In response to the unexpected explosion of ISIS, Russia sent in forces to help Assad in 2015, consisting primarily of air support and special operations forces (spetsnaz). Similarly, the U.S. responded by sending in SOF-heavy forces and air support, mostly to aid the Kurds in combatting ISIS. In 2016, Turkey and their allies, the Syrian National Army, occupied northern parts of the country. For the next several years, this confusing array of opposing forces worked to destroy ISIS which lost most of its turf and was largely defeated by 2019.

While the war looked like a stalemate, the power dynamics started to change when Hezbollah withdrew its forces in 2019, partly due to Damascus’ dislike of the growing influence of foreign groups in their country. Then, in 2022, Russia became consumed by its invasion of Ukraine, forcing it to withdraw most of its resources from Syria. The war remained static for two more years until HTS (Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham) conducted a lighting offensive in December 2024 which took the Syrian government by surprise. Just two week later, the Syrian army collapsed and Assad fled to Russia.

The salient characteristic of the Syrian Civil War was irregular warfare conducted by an array of different insurgent groups, militias, and non-state actors. The main state actors (Russia, Iran, U.S., Turkey) relied heavily on their special operations forces (SOF) to train, advise, and equip the armed groups they were supporting. Importantly, both the open and urban terrain lent itself to sniping which was used widely by all sides.

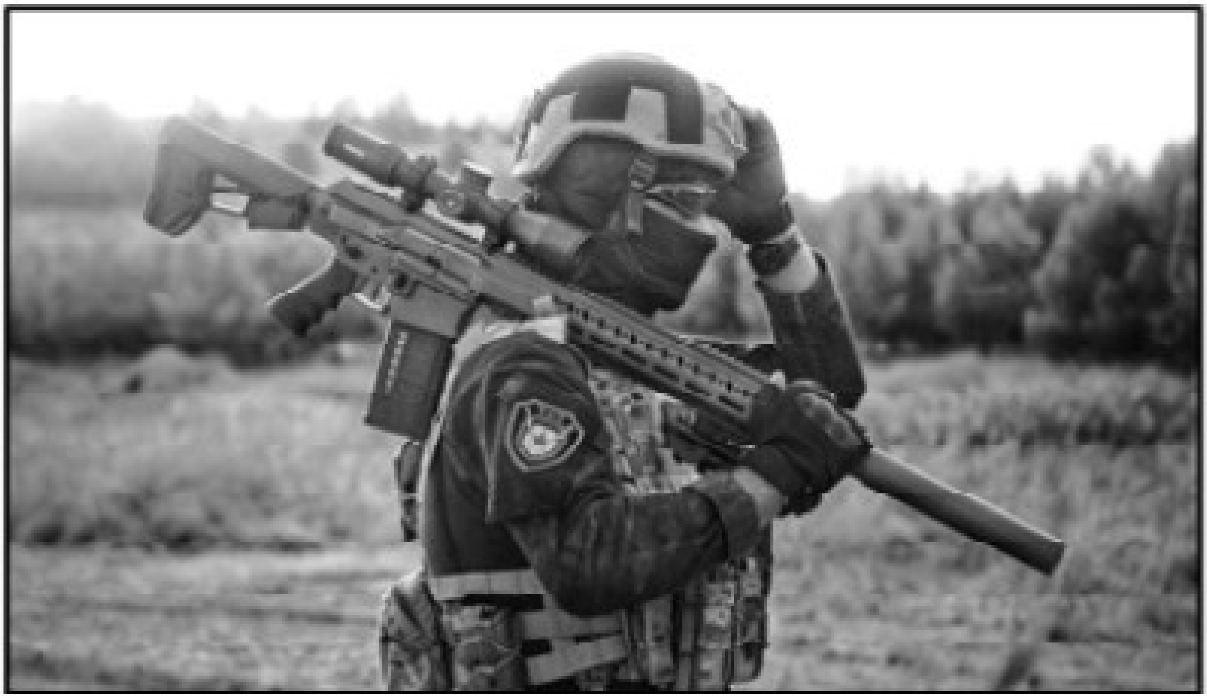
Sniping was conducted on such a scale on a daily basis by so many different groups that there is no way to singularly characterize it. The quality of sniping varied greatly from the Russian and American pros who were very good to inept guerrillas who had no idea what they were doing. The equipment used was also vastly disparate, from high-end professionally manufactured rifles used by SOF to WWII-era junk and homemade systems. Over time, the overarching sniper enterprise evolved where the grim reaper culled the ranks of the untrained and unlucky. Those that remained had more skill, better tactics, or survived by sheer chance. As they say in Aikido, war is like a piece of paper with life on one side and death on the other. It's that close.

The Kurds

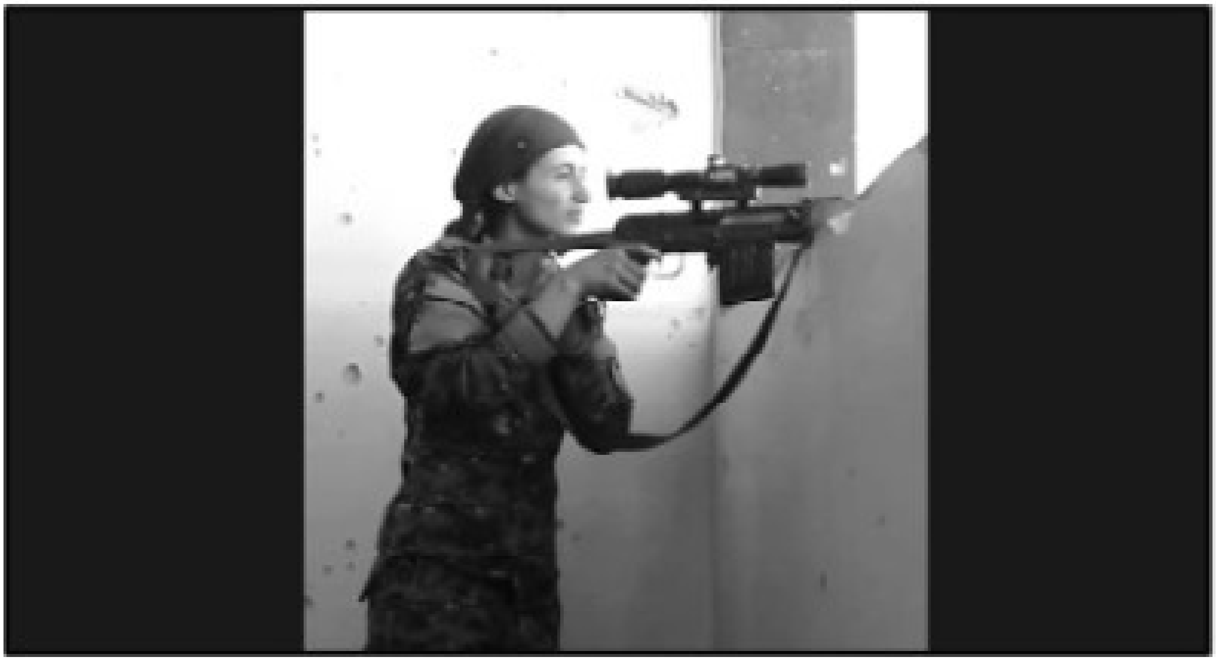
The Kurds have a precarious position in Syria because their longest border is with Turkey who does not want to see them empowered because this could lead to a revolt by their own Kurdish population. Turkey has fought a decades-long counterinsurgency campaign against their own Kurdish population led by the PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party). Turkey fears that the Kurds operating in Syria, who control about 30% of the country, will help the PKK continue their rebellion. Many of the surrounding nations view the Kurds with suspicion because they aren't Arab, even though the majority are practicing Sunni Muslims. Because the Kurds have no friends in the region other themselves, they have readily partnered with the U.S. against the Hussein regime and then against ISIS throughout the Syrian Civil War. Some of the most vicious battles of the war were fought in Kurdish territory like Kobani and Raqqa.

In Syria, the People's Defense Units (YPG) were the biggest group within the overarching Syrian Democratic Forces which is the military wing of the *Democratic Autonomous Administrative of North and East Syria* or simply "Rojava."

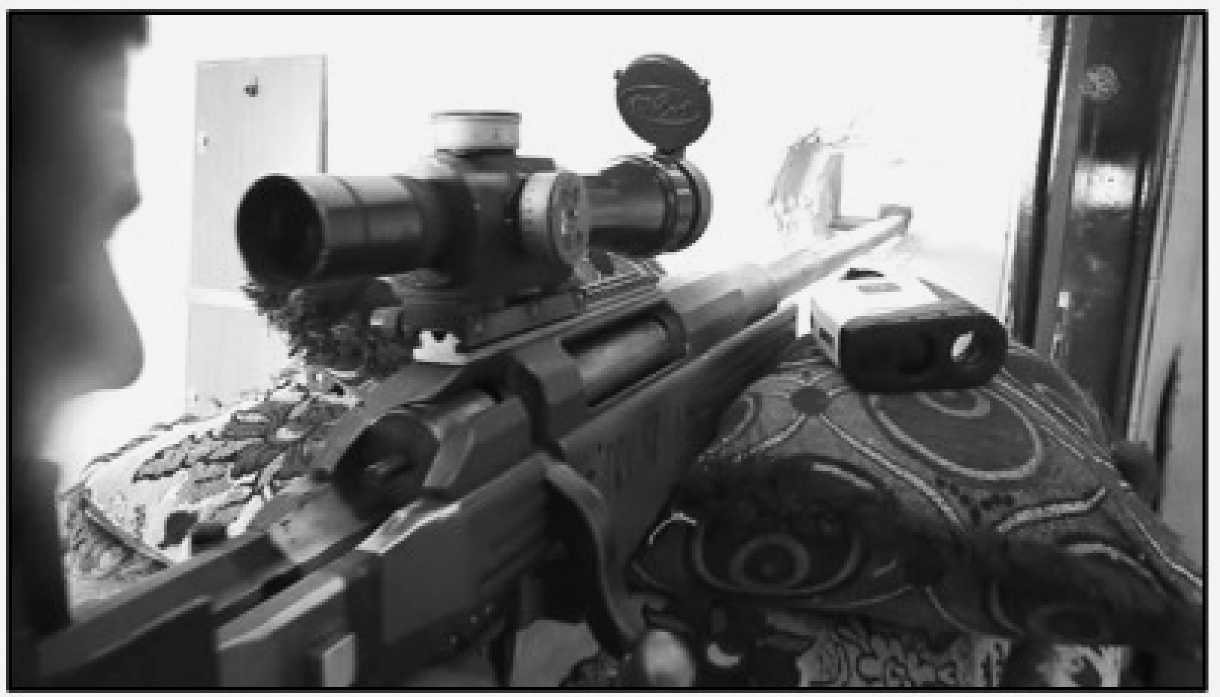
The U.S. officially began training and equipping the Kurds in 2014 through the *Syrian Train and Equip Program*. This involved training by U.S. Army forces to include SOF as well as the CIA which spent $1 billion annually on their Timber Sycamore covert assistance program. The quality of the Kurdish units depended on a host of factors like which U.S. (or U.K.) units trained them. Many units were trained to different levels of competence in sniping and the resulting overall quality of the sniping enterprise varied greatly. Highly trained units like the YAT snipers easily outclassed their ISIS and Syrian regime opponents.



This is a shooter from the Kurdish Anti-Terror Unit (YAT) which is their special forces unit trained by U.K. and U.S. SOF and the CIA. Their snipers received the highest levels of training on the battlefield. This YAT operator is carrying a British SWORD Defense Systems Mk17 C-SASS chambered for a 6.5 mm Creedmore. This weapon is used in the designated marksmen role or close-in urban precision shooting situations.



This is a sniper with an SVD from the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) with no understanding of even basic snipercraft. Several seconds after this photo was taken, an ISIS sniper missed hitting her in the head by an inch (the round struck the wall behind her). After the near miss, she sat down and talked nervously with the cameraman. This type of unskilled sniping was widespread on the Syrian battlefield.



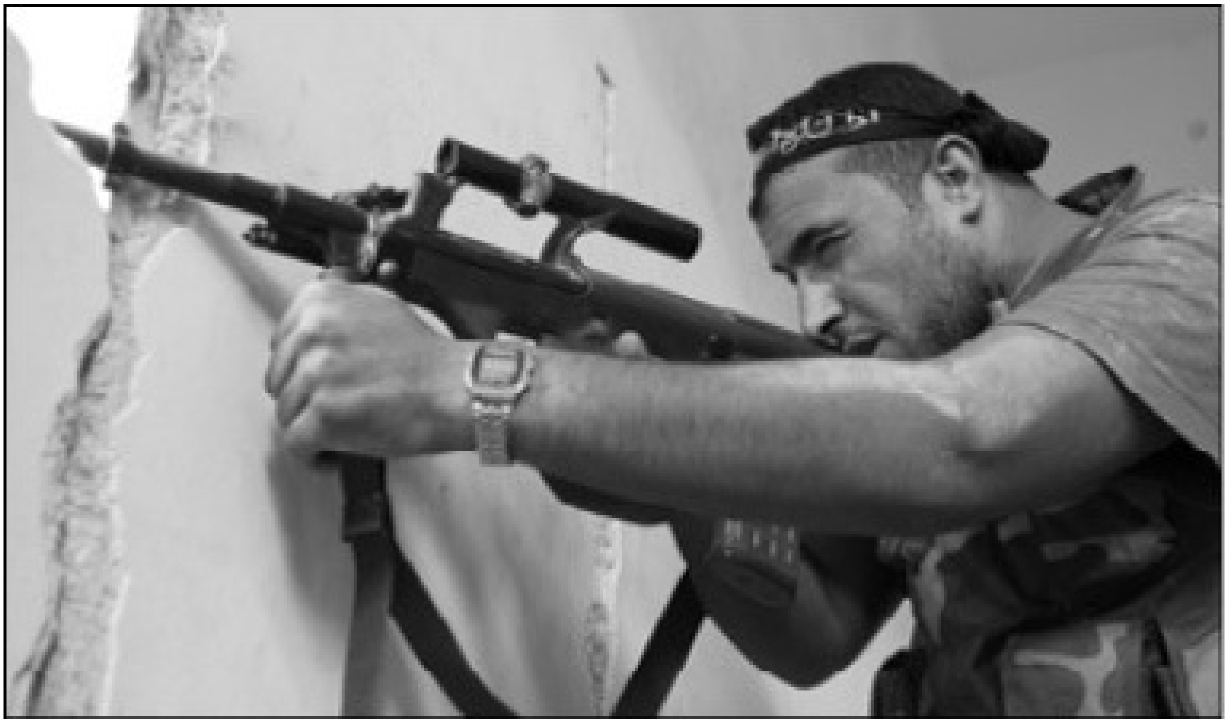
A Kurdish sniper in Idlib takes aim through a loophole in a wall with a 14.5x114 mm bolt-action anti-material rifle. This looks to be a knock-off of the South African Truvelo SR system with a different barrel. The original model has 1 MOA accuracy out to 500 m with an effective range of 1,800 m. Kurdish forces liked anti-material rifles because of their range and employed them frequently.

A YPJ female sniper takes aim with an SVD variant at ISIS fighters in Raqqa, 2017. When moving across open areas, ISIS commonly used civilians as human shields to protect them from snipers. This shooter is laying on a mattress for long-term comfort and firing through a loophole for concealment and protection. Compare her snipercraft to the other YPJ shooter.

The Free Syrian Army

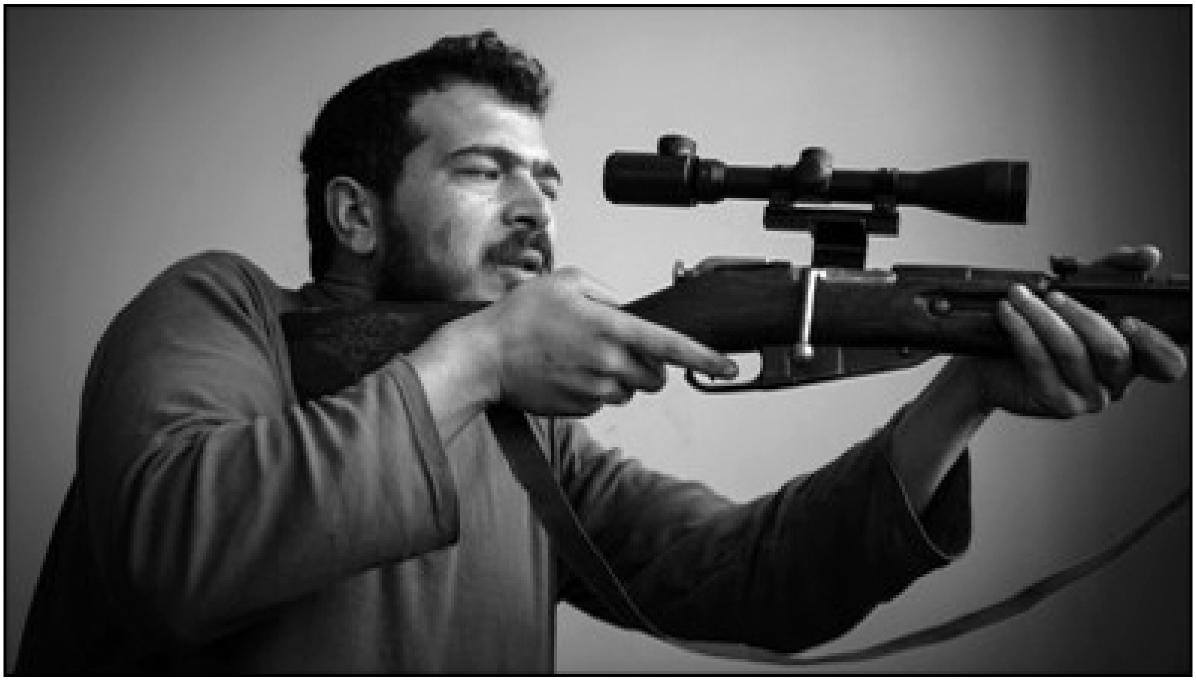
The FSA was the first armed insurgent group that fought the Assad regime, composed initially of defecting army officers and soldiers. The FSA was the first rebel group the U.S. supported with training and equipment and existed as a cohesive force until 2015 and then as a loose affiliation after that. The FSA was involved in the initial major urban warfare in cities like Damascus and Aleppo and had a steep learning curve tactics-wise. In the early years, the FSA was a collection of disparate groups with little or no training and it showed. The Iranian, Hezbollah, and Russian interventions halted and rolled back much of the FSA's initial gains who also had to fight an increasingly deadly ISIS capability.

With the Turkish intervention in 2016, many FSA affiliated militias fell under their coalition called the Syrian National Army (SNA). For the remainder of the war, elements of the FSA remained in the Al-Tanf Deconfliction Zone (ATDZ) near the intersection of the borders of Syria, Iraq, and Jordan. The ATDZ was an enclave protected by a U.S. military base and its associated airpower and used by Army SOF for training the FSA. By the end of the war, the FSA was relatively marginalized. In December 2024, when HTS rolled over most of the west coast regime forces, the FSA only made a small push to the north from the ATDZ while competing groups secured much more turf.



An FSA shooter sights down an Australian-made Steyr AUG 5.56 bullpup semi-automatic rifle in Aleppo, 2012. The Swarovski 1.5x power scope meant he could effectively engage targets at about 200 meters. Since they were still early in the war and likely received no tactical training, ad hoc snipers like this exhibited little or no snipercraft and learned from trial and error.

An FSA sniper aims a Remington M2010 Enhanced Sniper Rifle (ESR), a bolt-action weapon chambered in .300 Winchester Magnum with an effective range of 1,200 meters. This shooter likely doesn’t have the skills to use this advanced shooting platform to its full potential.



An FSA fighter aims a Mosin-Nagant 91/30 bolt-action rifle which was manufactured by Russia before WWII. He has affixed a modern low-power scope which sits high above the barrel, reducing inherent accuracy. Across the Middle East, the aging 91/30 was still quite common.

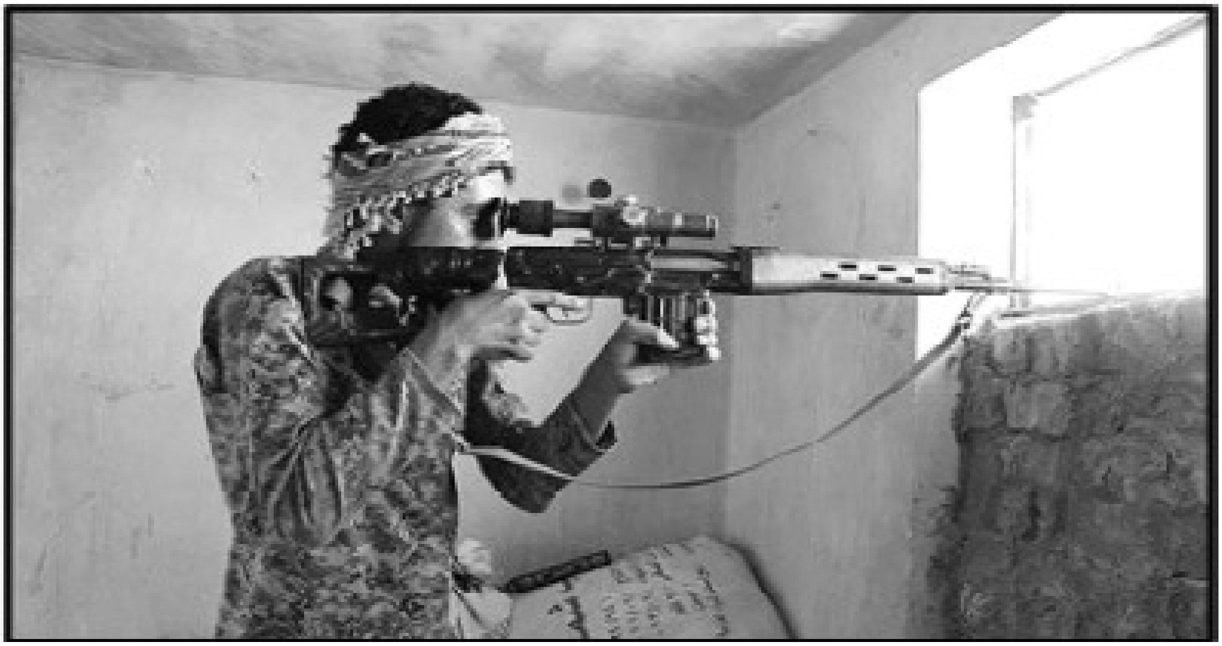
Early in the war (2013), this alleged FSA sniper called “Guevara” poses with an Austrian Steyr SSG69 7.62x51 mm. This 36-year old mother who used to be an English teacher was photographed holding several different weapon systems in Aleppo for a flurry of published articles. Guevara was allegedly born in Palestine and received arms training at a HAMAS camp in Lebanon.

ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria)

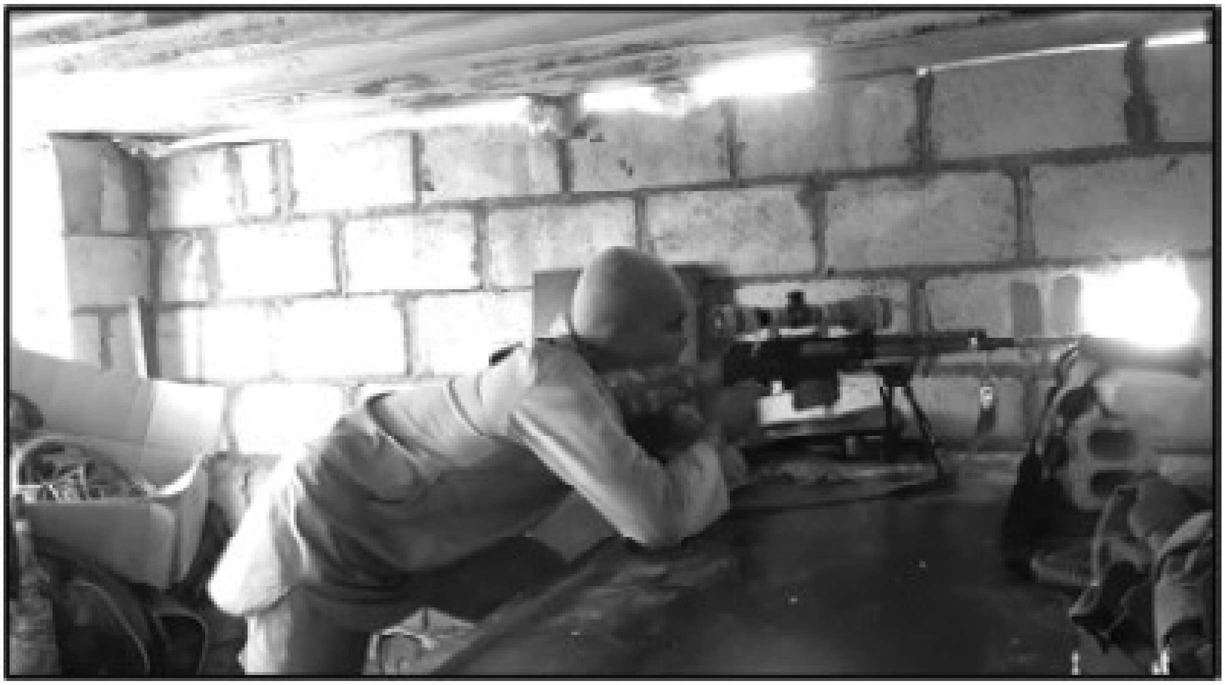
ISIS is a conservative militant Islamist movement formed in 2006 that tried to create a caliphate in the Syria and Iraq regions. The movement evolved out of Sunni militant groups from the Iraq War and captured large swaths of territory in 2013. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi who led an insurgent group to fight invading U.S. forces in 2003, became the group’s caliph from 2014-2019 until he committed suicide during a raid by U.S. forces. Under the height of their expansion in 2015, ISIS controlled 12 million people. Other militant groups around the world were attracted to the group’s uncompromising brutality with even some Taliban units converting to the ISIS banner. ISIS still controls small areas in Syria although they have mostly been destroyed and discredited as a movement.

ISIS, like all irregular militant movements, was a Frankenstein patchwork of militias and foreign volunteers with varying degrees of training, experience and battlefield competence. Many of its fighters had no tactical sense and their sniping efforts were amateurish. Other shooters showed an understanding of sniper tradecraft, employing tactics that concealed and protected them while giving them an advantageous shot. ISIS largely made do with assault rifles, mid-quality sniper systems, and anything else they could capture of fabricate for use.

An ISIS sniper fires from a comfortable position in Aleppo (2016) with an M16 variant. A second later, he shot an opposing fighter in the head as they looked above a roof retaining wall. The victim didn't know they were being targeted, stayed in the same position, and remained exposed for too long. The shot was close, only about 50 meters away.



This ISIS shooter is in Kirkuk (2015) firing from an enclosed position with an SVD and accompanying Russian military-issue scope. He has his barrel resting on the wall opening which is poor technique as it negatively affects the barrel harmonics, decreasing accuracy. However, these sloppy marksmanship fundamentals were common across the country by all sides.



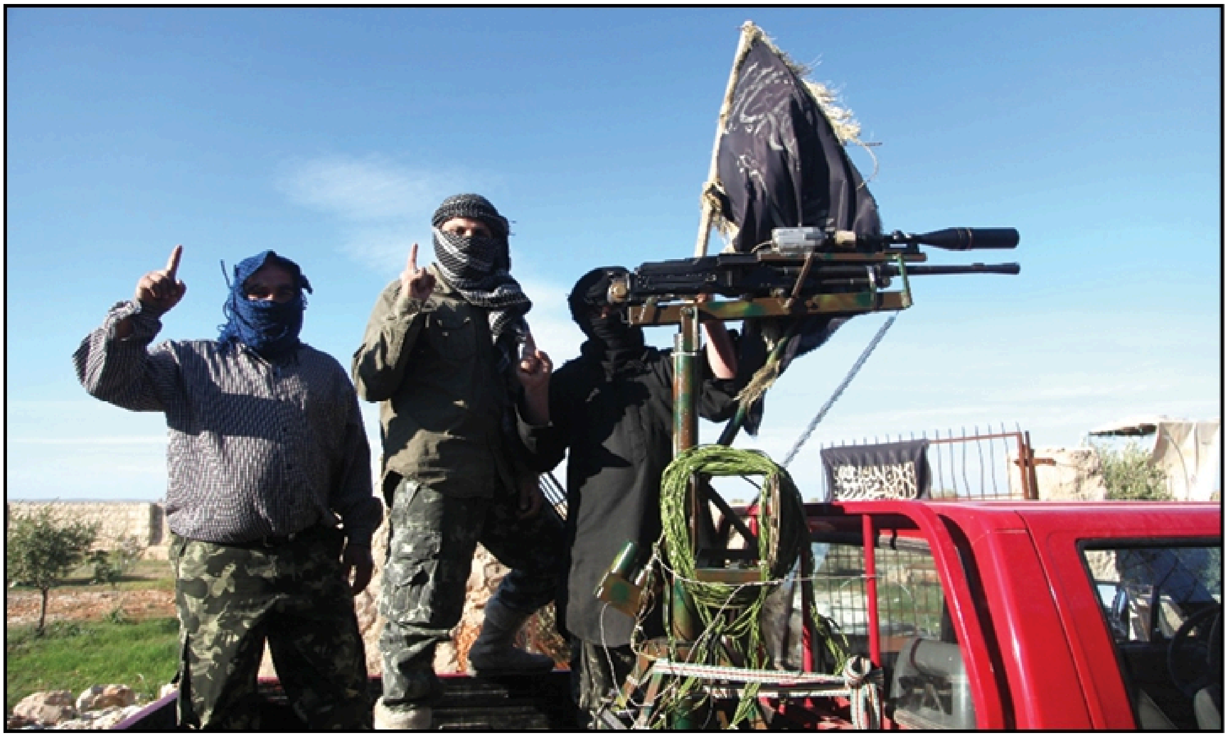
This ISIS sniper in Deir el-Zour (2015) shows good technique with a comfortable position for long-term scanning of the battlefield. He is using a bipod and the rifle muzzle is back from the loophole. He shows a better understanding of snipercraft than most of his peers.

An ISIS sniper takes aim with an FN M16A4 5.56 mm semi-automatic assault rifle in Raqqa, 2017. The weapon has a bipod, suppressor, and scope indicating the shooter is experienced and prepared for urban sniping. This is an ideal weapons platform for shots at 300 meters or less. He has placed tan colored tape on his front handguard, can, and scope for camouflage. He's resting his weapon on his hand which is braced against the wall – a good technique for stabilizing his shot.

Al-Nusrah Front (ANF) and HTS

ANF was founded in 2012 as an Islamist movement to destroy the Assad regime and establish a caliphate in Syria. One of the group's goals was the unification of Islamist forces in the country under their banner. With this methodology, they were able to attract foreign fighters who partnered with them in the Syrian Civil War. One aspect of their strategy was winning the hearts and minds of the populace which differed from ISIS' scorched earth policy. ANF officially announced its affiliation with Al-Qaeda in 2013 and then partnered with other Islamist groups in 2015 to form the Army of Conquest. However, in 2016, the group broke with Al-Qaeda even though this resulted in defections to include senior leadership.

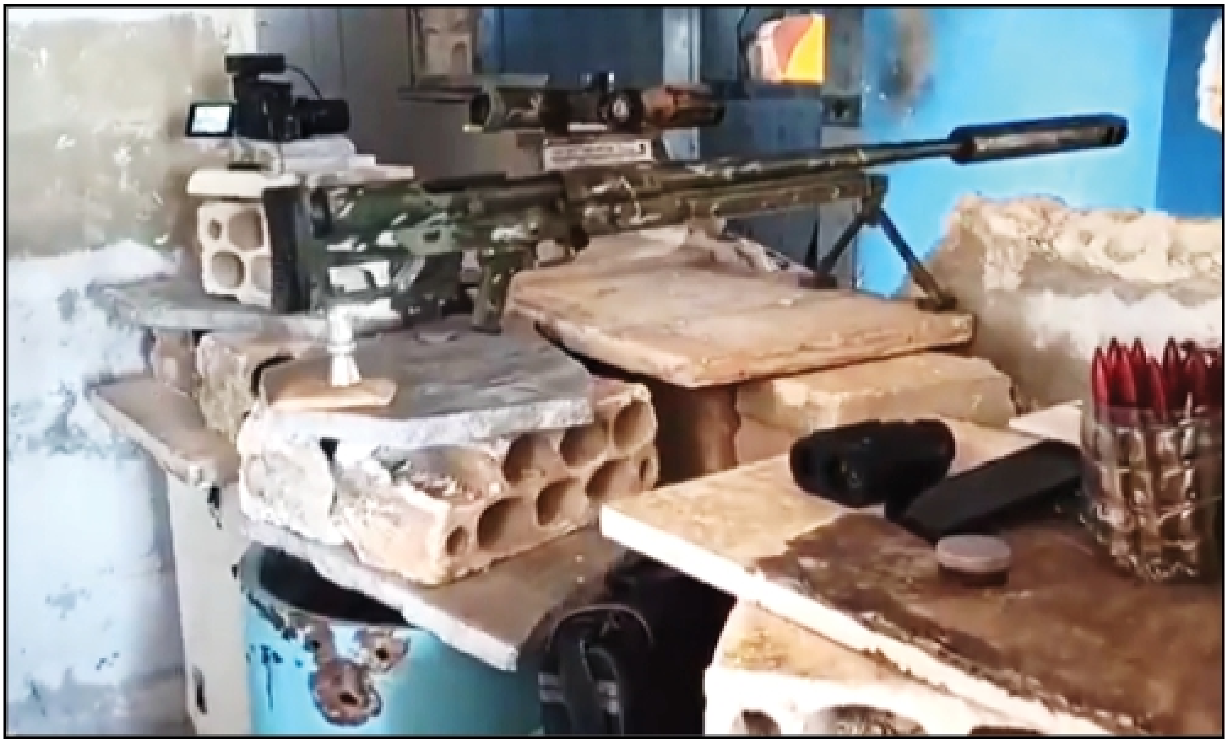
ANF subsequently changed their name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) and fought with other Islamist opposition groups in 2017 to include Ahrar al-Sham which was the second largest organization after the Free Syrian Army. JFS then merged with other groups to form Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) which would later steamroll what was left of the Syrian army in December 2024. HTS denied any affiliation with Al-Qaeda and most Al-Qaeda adherents still in JFS left in 2018 to form an HTS opposition group called Hurras al-Din (often called Al-Qaeda in Syria) which self-dissolved in early 2025. Beginning in 2021, HTS was the single most powerful opposition group in Syria. HTS publicly dissolved itself in 2025 as they evolved into the Syrian government.



In this very unusual photo, three Al-Nusrah Front fighters (2014) pose with a remotely operated sniper system. They have removed the stock of the weapon and have attached a camera to the scope. Other groups constructed remotely operated sniper and machine-gun systems to include the Kurds.

A member of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) opens fire somewhere in Idlib, 2018. TIP is a Uyghur nationalist movement in Pakistan that seeks to establish an Islamic state in China’s Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. TIP had Al-Qaeda affiliations and worked alongside the Al-Nusrah Front in Syria. Notice how the sniper has effectively camouflaged his weapon but not his scope.

Shooters from Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ) take target practice at a range in Idlib. KTJ was established in Syria in 2014 composed of Uzbek and Kyrgyz nationals who partnered with Al-Nusrah Front to establish a caliphate in northwest Syria. The group’s founder was killed in a Russian airstrike in 2022.

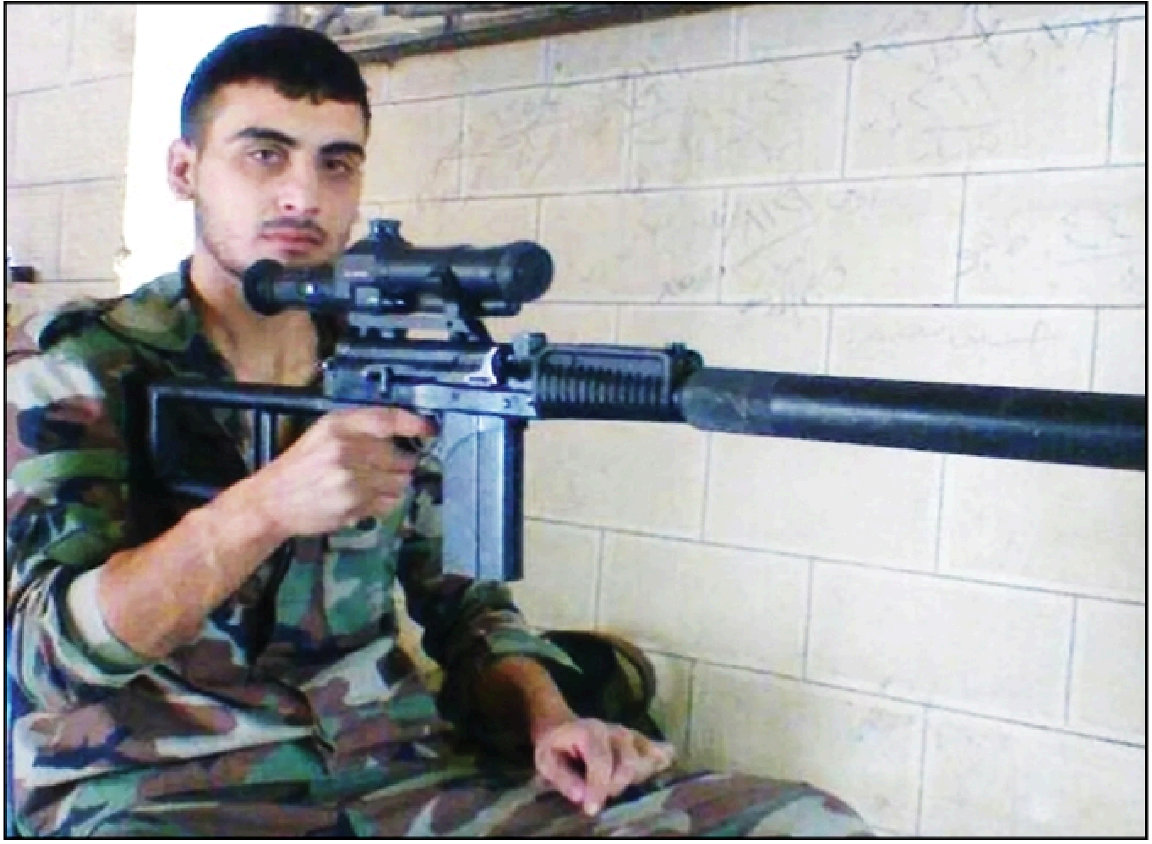


A sniper position of Liwa al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (LMA) in Idlib, 2021. This is likely an Iranian AM-50 rifle with suppressor and a high-definition camera to film their shootings. LMA is a jihadist group with members from the North Caucasus who partnered with Al-Nusrah Front in 2015 and then became active under HTS with the 2017 merger.

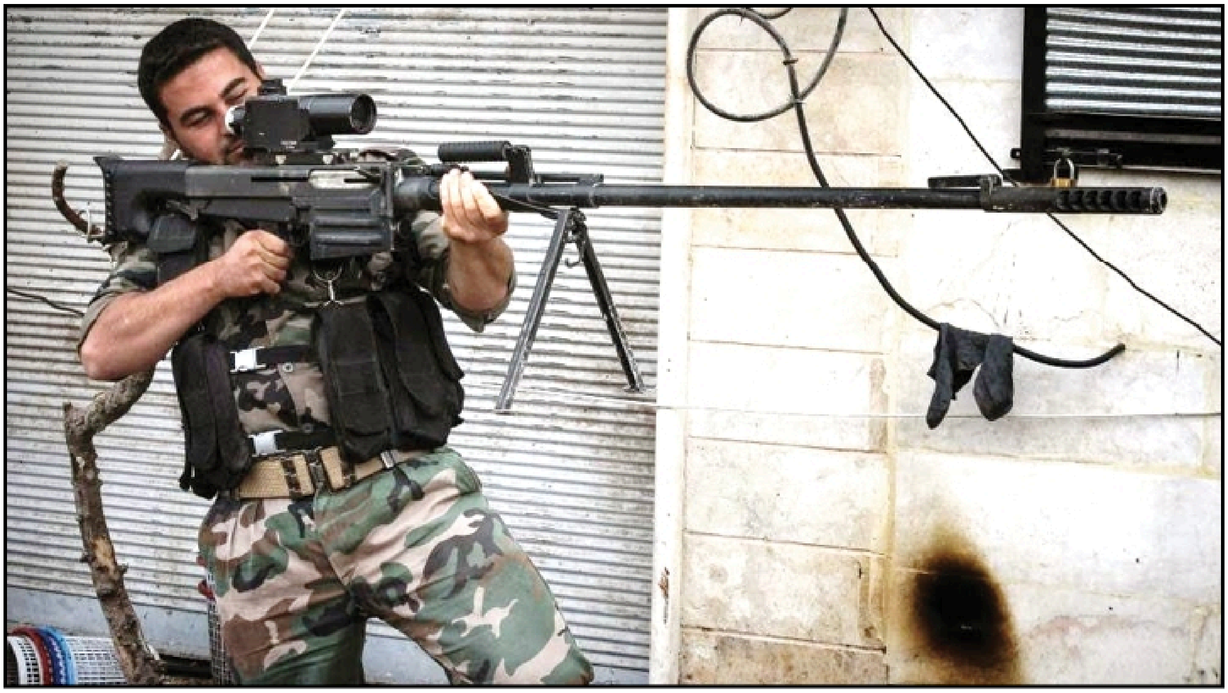
Syrian Arab Army (SAA)

The SAA was the Assad regime's military land forces that were funded and equipped by the state. By Western standards, the SAA was a barely competent organization with weak leadership and poor training, designed mainly to suppress its own citizens to keep the Assad family in power. Thus, the SAA was unprepared for large-scale warfare in 2011 even with irregular militias like ISIS and the FSA. Analysis shows that the SAA shrunk drastically from 220,000 people at the start of the war, to less than half that size by 2014 due to desertions and casualties. In 2024, when HTS made their final push, the demoralized and inept SAA panicked with large numbers taking off their uniforms and throwing their weapons and equipment on the ground in piles as they fled in fear.

The SAA sniper corps initially held a significant equipment advantage over their enemies because they had ready access to advanced Russian and Iranian sniper systems. However, the SAA snipers had little or no experience and training and experienced a steep learning curve just like the rebels. Because of the SAA's enduring incompetence as an organization rooted in sectarianism, Moscow was unable to restructure it into a more capable force. Consequently, Russian forces focused on conducting their own operations as opposed to training the SAA to include its sniper corps.

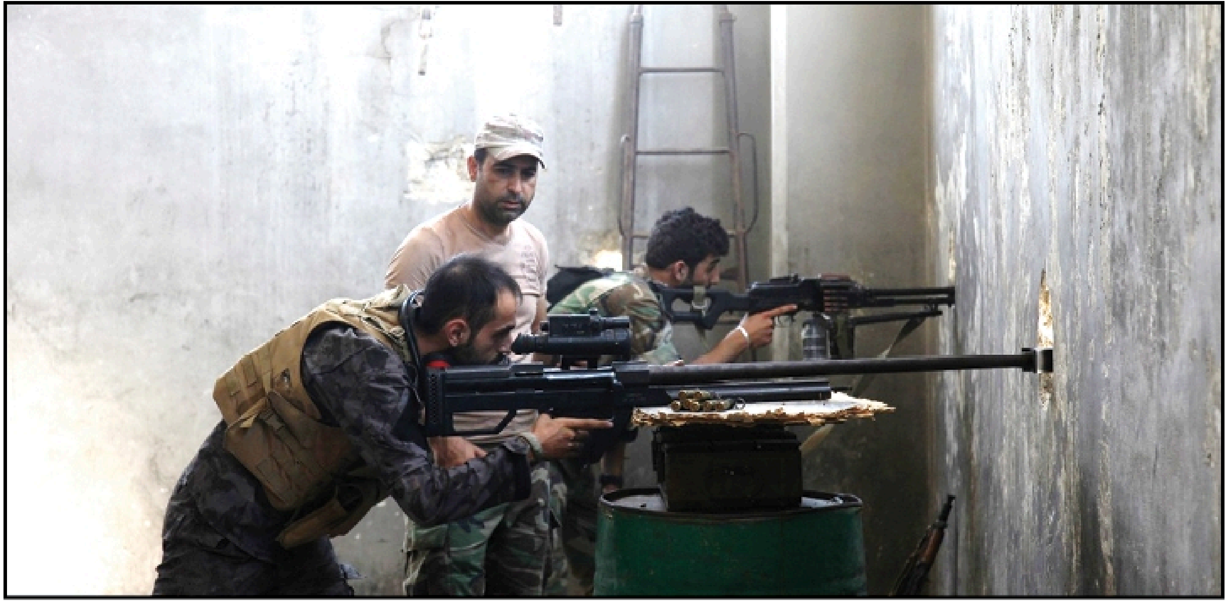


An SAA soldier displays a Russian a VSK-94 semi-automatic rifle firing subsonic 9x39 mm rounds with a suppressor, 2017. This is an excellent close-in urban sniping system. The SAA had access to purpose-built sniper systems like this from direct government to government sales with Russia.



Russia supplied the SAA with increasing numbers of OSV-96 12.7x108 mm anti-material rifles after the start of the war. In 2013, the Syrian government ordered 100 anti-material rifles, 100 scopes, and 10,000 rounds from Russia (OSV-96 and 6S8 Kord rifles).

An SAA sniper team aim a rarely seen Russian MTS 116M rifle out of a firing port. The MTS is a bolt-action rifle chambered for 7.62x54 mmR that began production in 1997 as part of the program to replace the SVD. In 2016, the SAA received shipments of MTS from Russia and issued them to female units. While the shooter is in a comfortable position, the weapon is too far forward and is not concealed. This is likely a staged photo.

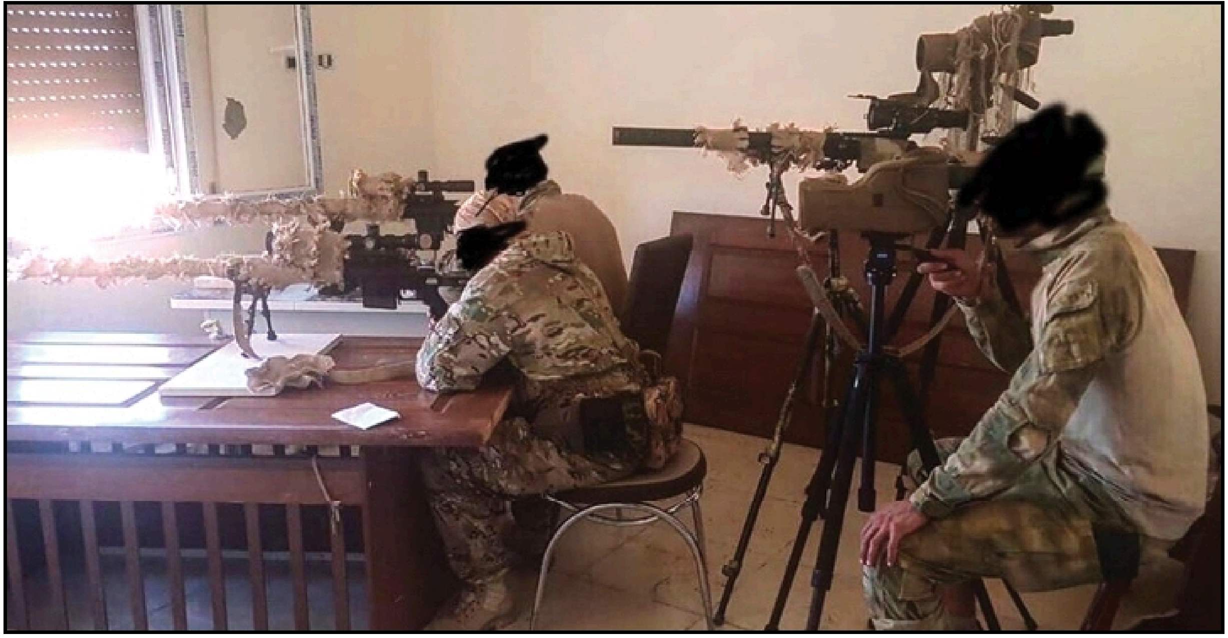


A machine-gunner and sniper with an HS-50 rifle aim through loopholes, 2016. As we can see, the sniper is too close to the opening so that his muzzle blast will not be contained by the room. Iran likely sent the Assad regime both original production Steyr HS-50 rifles and Iranian production AM-50 clones. In 2015, the Assad regime began manufacturing their own version called the Golan S-01.

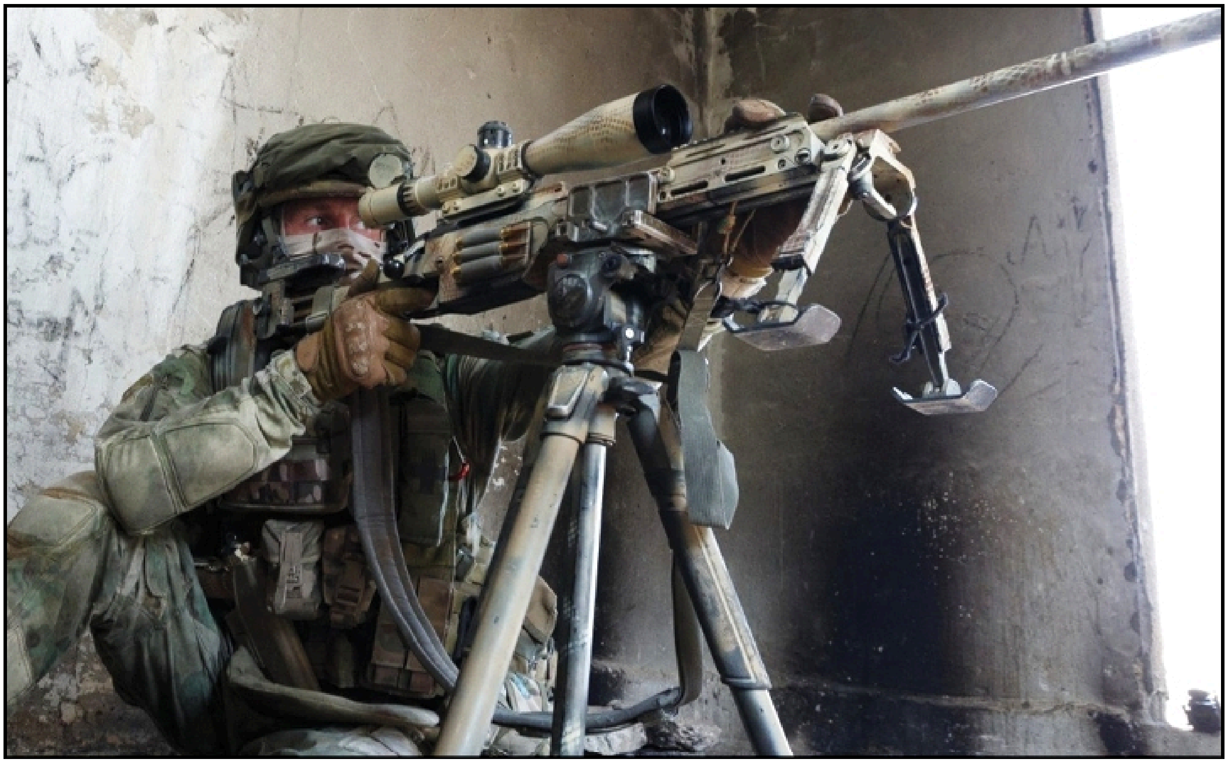
Russia

Russia's large-scale deployment of military forces in Syria began in 2015 which served several purposes to include propping up a faltering ally in a strategic geopolitical region and contributing to the destruction of ISIS. The Russian military effort to create a professional Syrian army ultimately failed as they were unable to overcome a confusing array of sectarian and political hurdles which included ongoing Iranian influence. Russian forces evolved to relying on their own units, backing militias they supported and the employment of extreme violence at scale which included bombing to rubble insurgent controlled cities (Kobani, Raqqa).

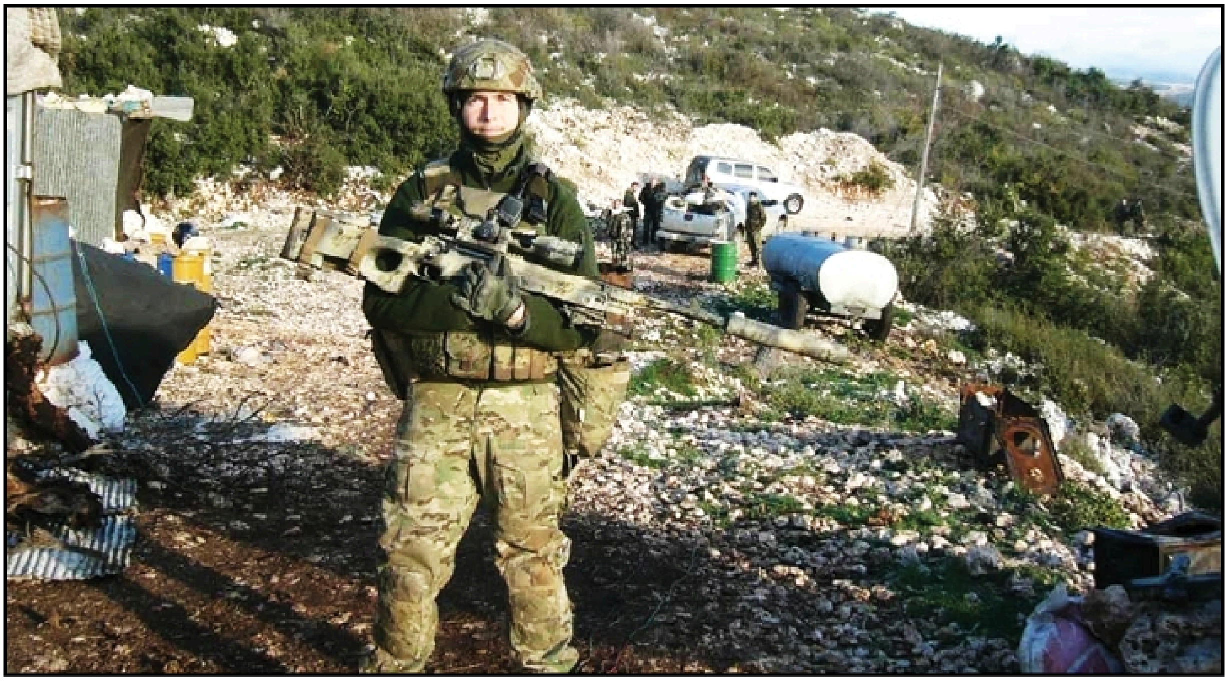
Russian sniper teams operating in the country were by far the best equipped and most capable of those fighting for the Assad regime. The Russians operated with trained teams who employed the latest weapons systems to include large-caliber rifles and sophisticated spotting scopes. Over the course of the war, Russia rotated hundreds of snipers through the country to gain experience. These included teams from their SSO (special operations forces), Spetsnaz units, the FSB and private military corporations like the Wagner Group. In one example, a Russian sniper employing a Steyer-Mannlicher SSG 04 had 54 confirmed kills over a nine month deployment in 2017. He was already an experienced shooter, previously having 9 confirmed kills serving in the North Caucasus. (Later, he got out of the army, suffered from PTSD, hyper-vigilance and paranoia and couldn’t get a job.)



A Russian sniper team is set up for comfortable long-term shooting from this position. The weapon on the tripod is the excellent Lobaev DVL-10 “Saboteur” bolt-action rifle chambered for 7.62x51 mm with an integral suppressor. The other two weapons are Lobaev DXL-3 Longstrikes .338LM.



A Russian sniper aims their Austrian Steyr-Mannlicher SSG 08 bolt-action rifle on a tripod somewhere in Syria. This system is used widely by the Russians and was first produced in 2008 and chambered in .300WM and .338LM.



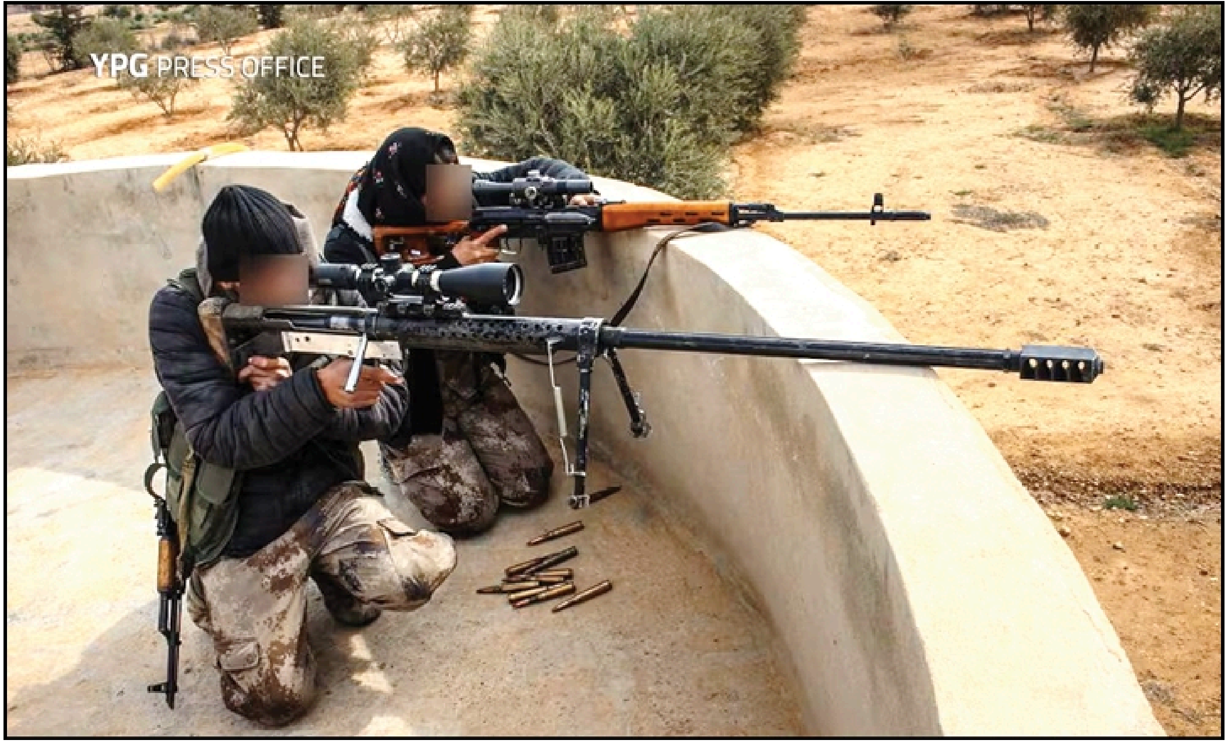
A Russian FSB Alpha Group sniper poses with a British Accuracy International L96A1 bolt-action sniper rifle with suppressor. This is a high-end very accurate weapon chambered in .330WM or .338LM. Russia legally purchased at least 109 AI sniper systems before the UK arms embargo in 2014.

A Russian sniper is set up in a makeshift yet comfortable seated position with a 6C8 Kord 12.7 mm bolt-action rifle. (The 6C8 is also known as the 6S8 and ASVK which can cause confusion.)

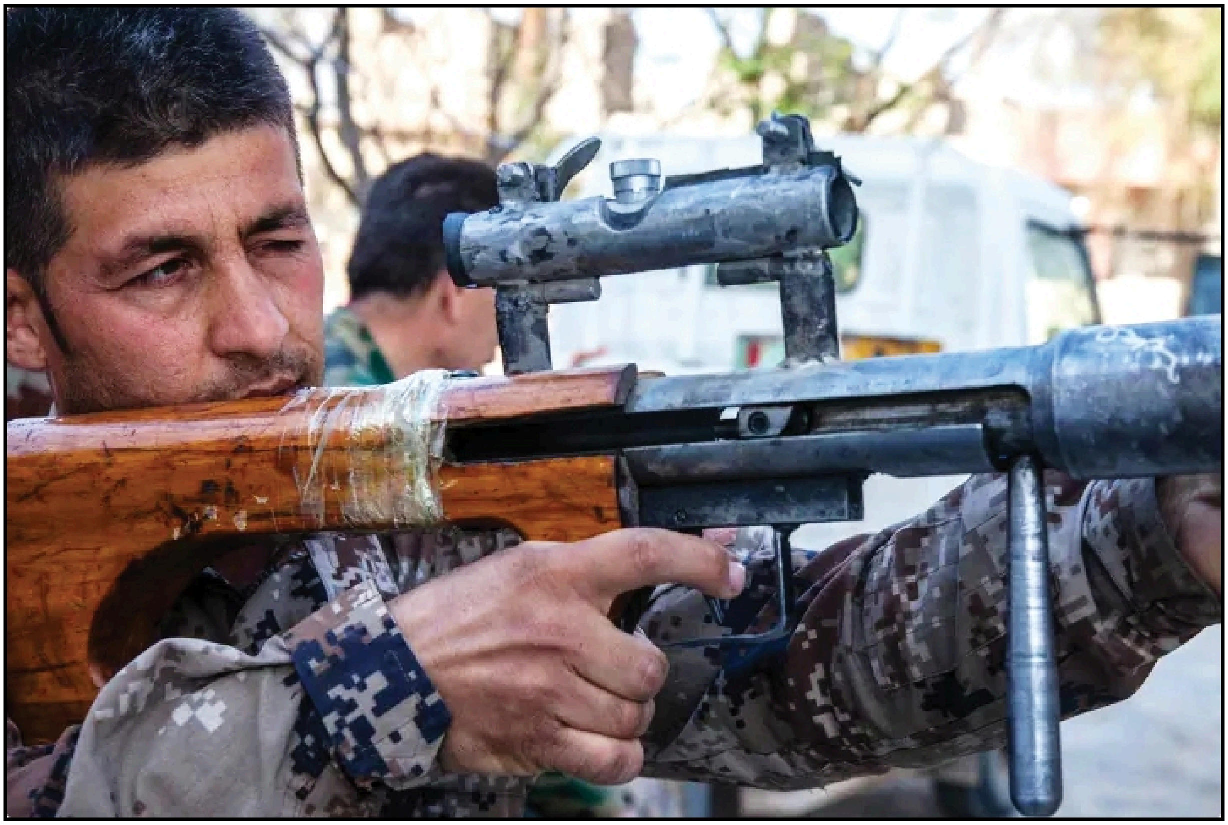
Other Observations from the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Civil War encompassed such physical space and time across a multitude of groups with access to a wide variety of weapons systems and related technology that it became a de facto sniping laboratory. State actors like Turkey, Iran, Russia and the U.S. gained valuable insights into evolving snipercraft with themselves contributing directly to this living body of knowledge. Russia found this knowledge particularly valuable going into the Ukrainian War which showcased the most intense levels of urban sniping since Stalingrad.

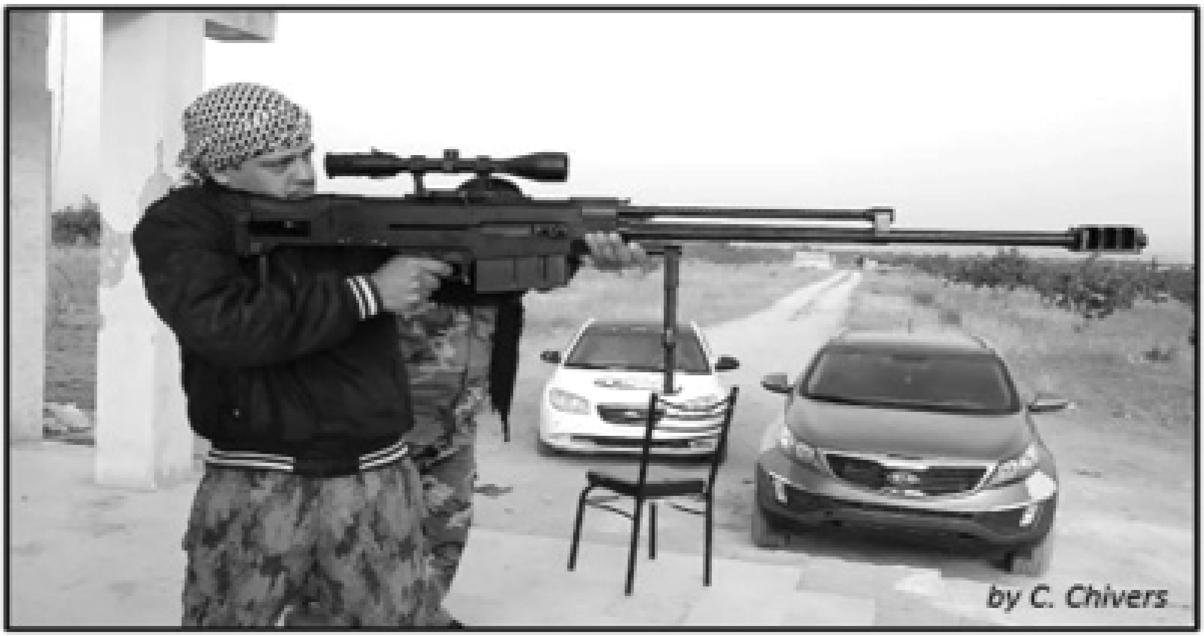
Because of the generally open terrain between urban centers and the advancement of sniper rifle engineering, there was a trend towards the use of larger caliber systems. While a large heavy rifle isn’t beneficial for close-in urban shooting requiring agility, it has obvious advantages from a static position where the shooter doesn’t have to rapidly displace. Also, we saw the use and expansion of drones for surveillance and lethal targeting which impacted sniper operations and would be taken to the next level in Ukraine and Gaza. Importantly, because of the ubiquitous use of cellphones and social media apps, there was a proliferation of sniper imagery available to the public. The average student of sniping no longer had to rely on embedded reporters or autobiographies from retired snipers to understand the trade of precision shooting when the shooters themselves uploaded this in real time.



In the back is a Kurdish sniper with a very common SVD rifle. The shooter in the front has a Zagros 12.7 mm sniper rifle which is fabricated by the Kurds using the barrels from Russian DShK machine guns. They also produce a 14.5 mm version using barrels from KPV heavy machine-guns.

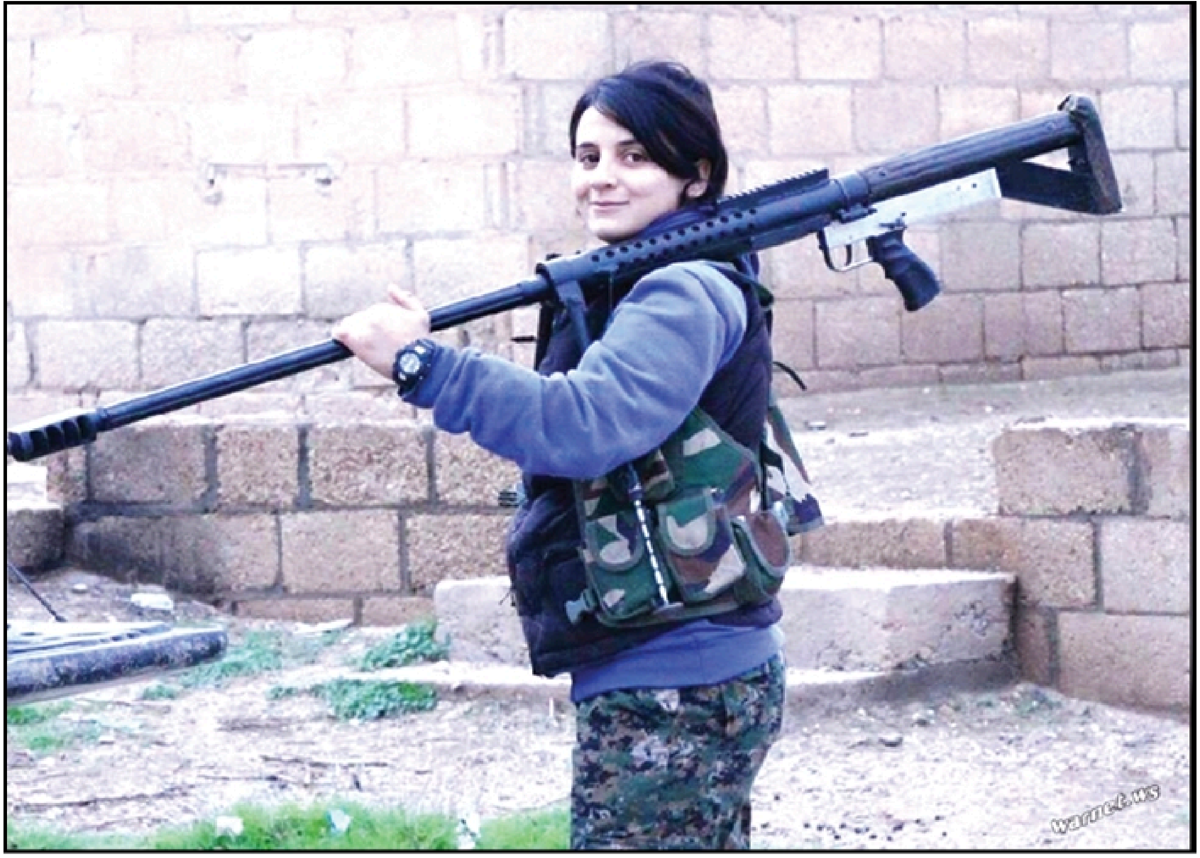


A Kurdish fighter looks through the sight of a bolt-action .50 sniper rifle fabricated by ISIS using a variety of parts to make a complete system. The barrel is most likely from a 12.7 mm DShK heavy machine-gun.

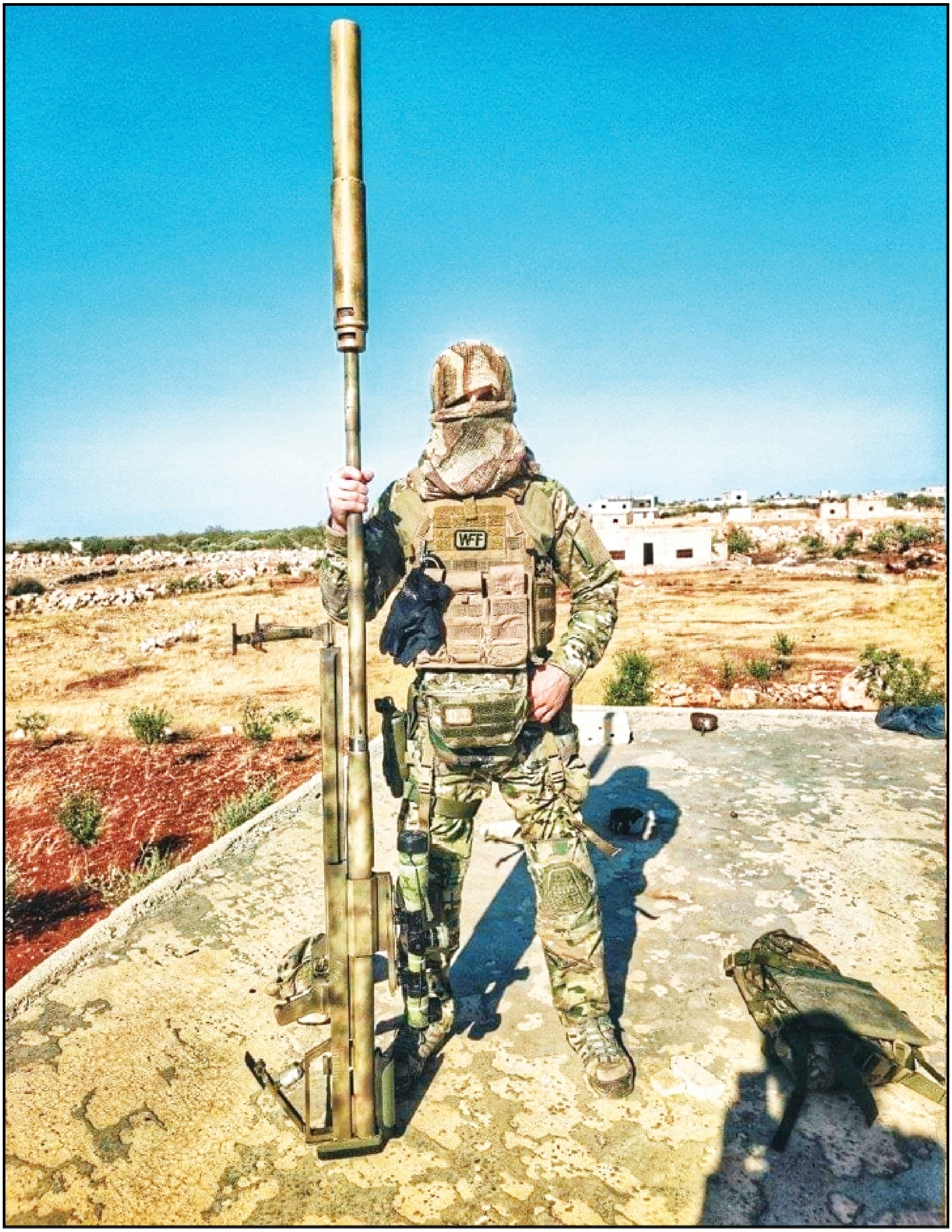


by C. Chivers

The Chinese Zijiang M99 12.7 mm semi-automatic rifle was first produced in 2005 and made its way into Syrian rebel hands by 2014. Possibly, Qatar purchased these M99s in Sudan and shipped them to groups that they supported like the FSA, Al-Nusrah Front and the Army of Conquest.



This Kurdish YPG fighter displays a Zagros 14.5 mm sniper rifle fabricated in a local workshop by a skilled gunsmith. Notice the manufactured muzzle brake and fluted barrel. The receiver and picatinny mounting rail appear to be well engineered as well. The stock is adequate although less well engineered.



A picture of the 14.5x114 mm bolt-action Snipex "Alligator" sniper rifle manufactured in Ukraine with a rebel in Idlib. After Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Kyiv deployed select numbers of their special operations forces (GUR) to Syria to help militia groups target Russian forces. More recently, Ukrainian forces arrived in country in November 2024 with 20 drone operators and 150 FPV drones to assist the last HTS push.[38]

PRESS
@WAR_NOIR

HTS members posted this picture in April 2025 during their assault on Druze militias in southern Syria. It appears the fighter on the left has an AK-47 variant with scope and the one in the middle an SVD variant with scope. The one in the foreground has the Chinese M99 12.7 mm sniper rifle which they most likely captured from an opposing militia or merely secured from groups that later became incorporated into HTS. The M99 has a front bipod, rear monopod and a muzzle brake. Notice how none of these shooters are using a suppressor. Of note, China does not manufacture a suppressor for the M99 so one would have to be fabricated by a third-party or homemade.

Chapter 21

Ukraine Update

The Euromaidan Uprising and the Snipers' Massacre

The Euromaidan Uprising erupted in November 2013 when Ukrainian President Yanukovych refused to sign an economic cooperation agreement with the European Union (EU). Instead, Yanukovych chose closer relations with Russia despite his parliament overwhelmingly supporting stronger ties with Europe. The majority of Ukrainians saw this as a betrayal of their national political will and outright corruption by Yanukovych and his influential oligarch supporters. Subsequently, tens of thousands of protesters flooded the streets of Kyiv, becoming the largest popular democratic movement since the fall of the Soviet Union.

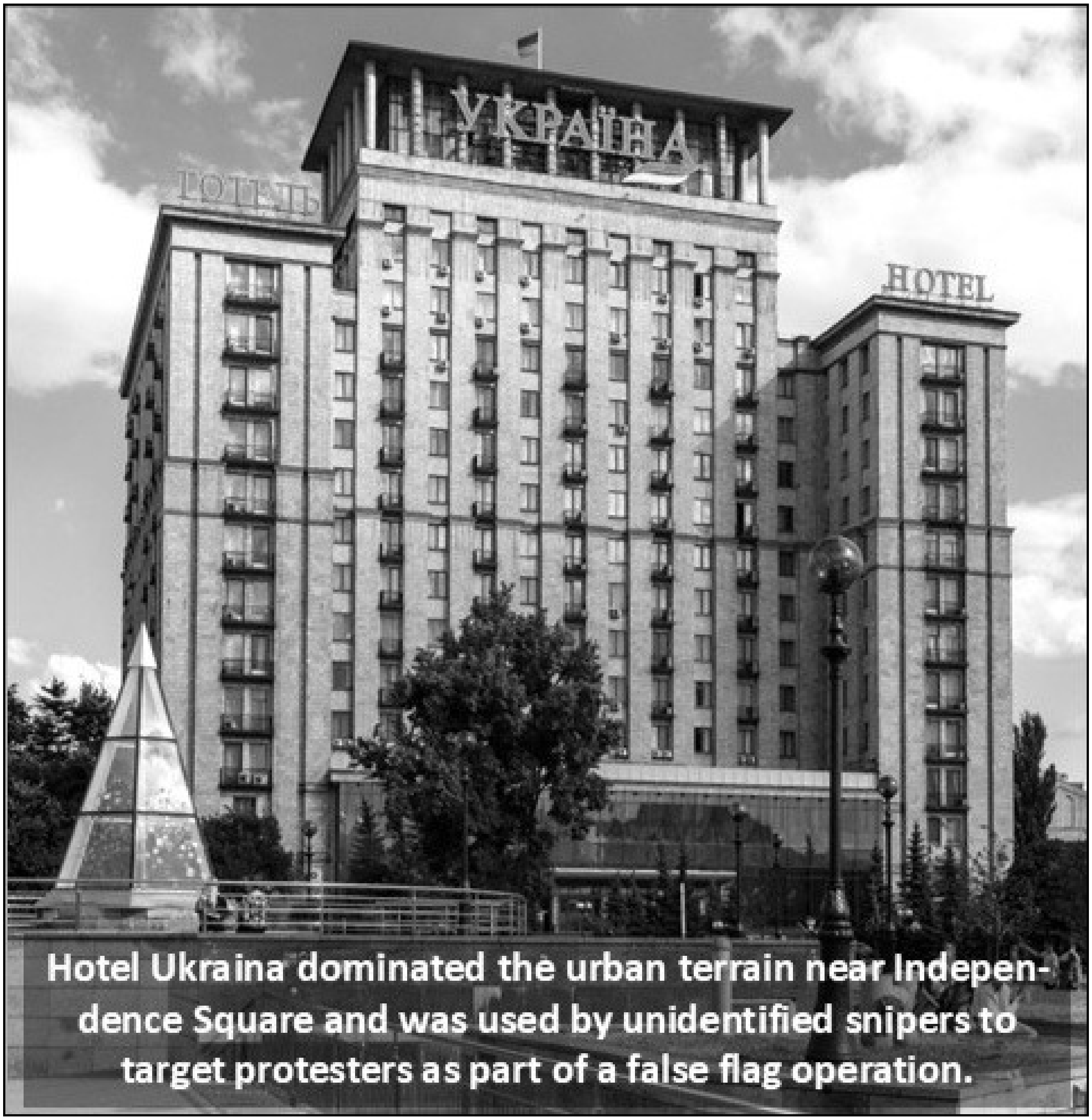
While protests were held throughout Ukraine, the largest ones were in the capital which became violent by the end of the year with riot police regularly fighting demonstrators in hand to hand combat. The turning point for the contest came on February 20, 2014, when forty-nine protesters and four police were shot and killed, in part, by hidden sniper teams. This led to the subsequent overthrow of the government with Yanukovych fleeing to Russia. The West accepted the narrative that Yanukovych ordered this massacre with backing from Moscow. However, some of the killings were likely from a false flag operation orchestrated by an alliance of far-right nationalist organizations determined to overthrow the government.[39]

During the lead up to and on the day of the shootings on the 20th, there was much confusion as to what organization or group of people did what. Overall, the Maidan protestors controlled and occupied the outer ring of buildings and surrounded the Berkut (special riot police) and Internal Troops security forces. While both the security forces and the increasingly militant and armed resistance groups fired at each other at various times, it is difficult to prove who specifically killed who. Only through an exhaustive investigative and forensic process could the identities of the shooters be determined. However, as of 2025, successive governments have been unwilling to pursue this and no opposition groups or persons have been charged.

So, what do we know? Unidentified shooters used up to twenty different multi-story buildings to conceal their positions such as the Hotel Ukraina, the Trade Unions building, and the Music Conservatory. In one example, a Maidan shooter fired at riot police from the Conservatory using a civilian semi-automatic Saiga rifle with a scope.[40] In another incident, evidence indicates ten protestors were shot and killed from the Hotel Ukraina from the same 7.62 mm rifle which was never recovered.[41] The shooting of many of the protesters is believed to be a false flag operation intended to increase the chaos, violence, and outrage of the protesters.

Witnesses attested to a number of rifle shots fired from the Hotel Ukraina and other buildings not under government control having a different “whip like” noise than the riot police’s issued AKM assault rifles. While treating protesters’ gunshot wounds, medical personnel discovered that some bullets were not full metal jacket (FMJ) rounds and were either soft-nosed or hollow point rounds. Also, other rounds were found to be larger than 7.62 mm in size indicating they were likely fired from civilian weapons like hunting rifles.[42]

Importantly, most of the protesters who were killed on the morning of the 20th (35 out of 49) were located in a rectangular kill box. This box was defined by the Zhovtnevyi Palace in the northwest corner, the Hotel Ukraina in the southwest, the Arcada Bank in the southeast, and the Muzeiny Lane buildings in the northeast. Multiple eye-witnesses and wounded attested to being shot at from multiple directions simultaneously from buildings that were controlled by other protesters. This indicates different elements within the larger anti-government movement coordinated the shooting of their own people.



Hotel Ukraina dominated the urban terrain near Independence Square and was used by unidentified snipers to target protesters as part of a false flag operation.

The government deployed its own official sniper units during the protests to include teams from the SBU’s Alpha Group and the Internal Troop’s Omega Group. Their mission was to target armed protesters and specifically snipers firing from the Hotel Ukraina. These sniper teams were set up in several buildings parallel to Instytutska Street, with the closest ones about 150 meters east of Hotel Ukraina. While these units undoubtably shot armed protesters as ordered, they could not have caused the wound ballistics of the protesters who were shot at a high-angle from the direction of the Hotel Ukraina.

Overall, the false flag sniper operation was successful as it brought the mood of the protesters to a boiling point, resulting in the overthrow of the government. The shooters and their supporting organizations effectively capitalized on the confusion at the time to manipulate the urban terrain to achieve their tactical goals. The anti-government riflemen weren't professional snipers, they were hastily recruited amateurs who used assault rifles or hunting rifles. However, the one unidentified shooter with ten kills from the Hotel Ukraina may have had more training and better equipment, although we will most likely never know.

It is interesting to note that both the police and the protesters thought the snipers in the Hotel Ukraina were working for the other side and targeting each of them. Like the JFK assassination, the Ukrainian government became disinterested in conducting a thorough forensic investigation. Even President Zelensky admitted that key evidence had been lost, crime scenes had been tampered with, and the entire judicial system required a "reboot."[43] This leaves us with the question: who benefitted most from the snipers' massacre?

Russia Invades Crimea and Donbas 2014-2022

Putin seized on the confusion from the overthrow of Yanukovych and invaded and occupied Crimea within a week. Ukrainian troops were in such disarray with Russian forces moving so quickly that the peninsula was taken without a shot. In March 2014, Russia formally annexed Crimea, which the United Nations declared invalid, while increasingly fortifying it with its armed forces. Due to the geography of the Crimean peninsula, the actual land bridge connecting to Ukraine was relatively small so there was limited opportunity for the sides to fight each other. In 2018, Russia completed a security fence along the peninsula's border to further isolate it from Ukraine.

In Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, events unfolded differently with Russian-backed paramilitary groups taking over parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. This prompted the creation of similar Ukrainian paramilitary organizations like the Donbas and Azov Battalions who conducted counterattacks until the battle lines hardened. By the summer of 2014, the regular armed forces of both sides were increasingly involved in what became static trench warfare as frontline troops dug in. Before the expansion of the war in 2022, the zero line (the forward line of troops) ran about 260 miles in length. While most of the zero line was in a rural setting with trench systems like those used during WWI, it also ran through urban areas like the industrial town of Avdiivka. In some cases, opposing trench lines were less than 100 meters apart.

Of the estimated 14,000 total casualties taken on both sides from 2014- 2022, most were caused by shelling and then small-arms fire which included snipers. The International Crisis Group conducted a study of military casualties taken by Ukrainian forces in the Donbas from January 2020 to February 2022, cataloguing 343 cases. The casualty list showed 108 injured from artillery fire, 64 from snipers, 50 from small arms fire, 50 from mines, and only 7 from drones. This indicated that Russia used snipers on a wide scale in both rural and urban settings. Initially, sniping on both sides was dominated by inexperienced shooters with outdated equipment like the mass-produced Soviet 7.62 mm SVD sniper rifle.

The poorly trained Ukrainian army evolved over time, starting out with no designated snipers except in Special Forces and national counterterrorism units. This changed as they received advanced training from Western countries and placed professional sniper teams at the battalion level. It also took years for Ukraine to develop its own small arms industry to transition away from old Soviet sniper systems. For example, UKROP Zbroyar began producing their Z-10 semi-automatic sniper rifles in 2012 although they didn’t reach the Donbas until 2015. Because Ukraine’s military logistics system was so inadequate, President Poroshenko bought eighty-two Z-10s himself and gave them to Ukrainian special forces units.[44]

The massive Avdiivka Coke Plant was part of the urban terrain making up the front lines. The Russians finally captured the town in 2024 after taking an estimated 45,000 casualties.

That same year, the Ukrainian army begun training its snipers in a systematic way, establishing a 90-day sniper course for soldiers who were now dedicated snipers. Before that, training was sporadic with units raising funds and buying for themselves the equipment and weapons that they needed. It was also unhelpful that the country's police and military sniper schools remained separate with law-enforcement focusing on close-range shots in an urban terrain.[45] Ukraine subsequently established annual sniper competitions to professionalize its force and encourage the spread of improved battlefield tradecraft.[46]

In 2017, the Trump administration authorized the private sale of sniper systems to Ukraine. This led to the acquisition of a number of different bolt-action sniper rifles like the M24 based on the Remington 700 chambered for the NATO 7.62x51mm round. Ukraine also acquired the Savage 110, the H-S Precision, the Steyer Mannlicher SSG, and the Accuracy International sniper systems. All of these were chambered for the .300WM, .308, or the .338LM rounds, although getting enough ammunition was initially difficult.[47]

In 2019, the Ukrainian army ordered 600 units of the militarized version of the Z-10 called the UAR-10, chambered in the NATO 7.62x51 mm round. This was an important development because it was the first time Ukrainian industry manufactured a purpose-built sniper rifle chambered for a NATO round. Zbroyar also began manufacturing its own .308 and .338 ammunition for the Ukrainian military which showed an increased alignment with NATO supply chains. Furthermore, the UAR-10 was based on the American AR-style platform, which was a distinct evolution from low-quality Soviet equipment.

On the other side of the zero line, the Russians developed a two-tier sniper system. Soldiers recruited locally from the Donbas used old Soviet SVD sniper systems and received training in Russia. These systems were frequently upgraded with bipods, suppressors, new barrels, and improved ammunition. The shooters were designated marksmen who could engage targets out to 800 meters although precision fire at this distance was doubtful. Soon, the Russian military began using the Donbas as a training grounds, rotating in professionally trained sniper teams with the latest equipment to test their tactics on Ukrainian forces.

Ukrainian intelligence estimated that Russia began sending professional sniper teams to Donbas in 2016 with an average of fifty snipers from different agencies on the zero line at any time.[48] Teams used the custom-built Lobaev SVL bolt-action rifle chambered for the .408CT round with an effective range of 2,200 meters. As with the Ukrainians, this showed an evolution towards much higher quality systems made by experienced gunsmiths. Two-man spotter/shooter teams used advanced thermal imaging cameras to conduct persistent surveillance to identify targets. These well-trained teams also used suppressors, high-end scopes, camouflage, and effective stalking procedures.

The UAR-10 has a 22-inch chrome-lined free-floating barrel and a Leupold Mark 4 scope. It is for designated marksmen engaging targets out to 1200 meters.

The persistent sniper threat on both sides demanded improved counter-sniper measures although this varied in quality along the zero line and depended on the unit. Some Ukrainian units used trench scissor-scopes to watch enemy lines through gunports without exposing themselves as targets. Other techniques included setting up life-like uniformed dummies along with a heat source to attract Russian snipers using thermal cameras or rifle scopes. Both sides increasingly used persistent surveillance through technologically advanced camera systems running from an external power source. For instance, the Ukrainian company Archer (Thermal Vision Technologies) developed the SYCH M30 anti-sniping system in 2021. These remotely operation systems conducted all-weather surveillance with the ability to detect enemy optical devices and determine their range and location.

The Special Military Operation: 2022-2025

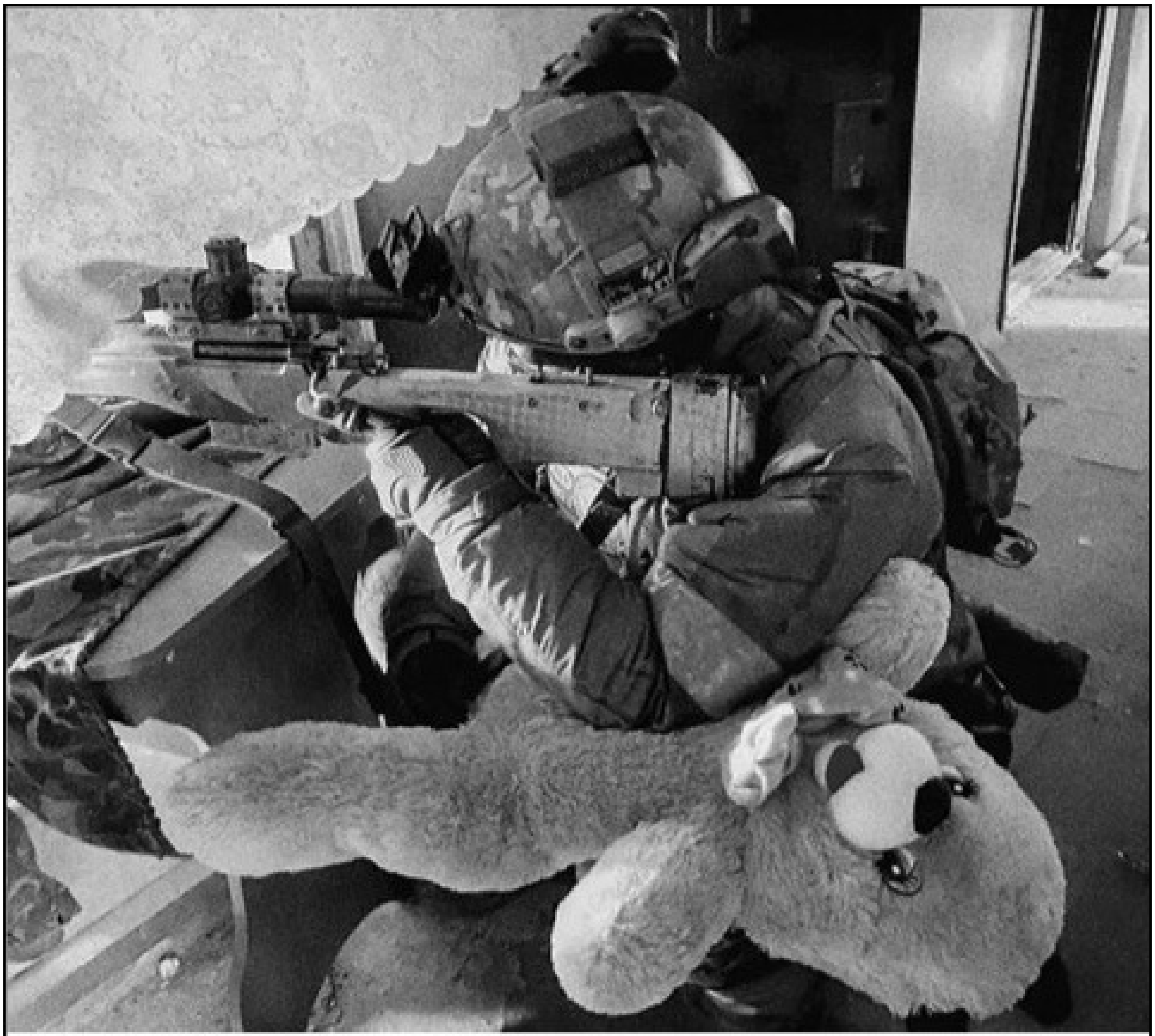
In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in an attempt to overthrow the Kyiv government, defeat its military, and occupy the country. Russian forces had considerable initial success and it looked like they would accomplish their goals in a matter of weeks. However, the armored columns moving on Kyiv were halted, largely destroyed, and forced to retreat. Then, Russian forces in the northeast pulled back to the border under heavy pressure while taking massive casualties. Finally, invading forces in the south had to abandon Kherson in fear of being surrounded, with Moscow threatening to use nuclear weapons to prevent their army’s destruction.

By the summer of 2023, the Russians lost so many armored vehicles to anti-tank weapons and FPV (First Person View) drones that they could no longer conduct maneuver warfare. The destruction of Russia’s mechanized fleet was so complete that by early 2025 they relied on unarmored civilian vehicles, ATVs, and motorcycles for battlefield transportation. The front lines became static with Ukraine defending against grinding Russian meat-wave attacks from the east. In many ways, the war reverted back to the WWI style of trench warfare that both sides had previously endured for almost a decade in the Donbas.

Because the new phase of the war was conducted on a massive scale, both armies went through the same process again of educating their respective forces about sniper warfare. Clearly, both sides didn’t capture the lessons of the Donbas and transfer this knowledge to the rest of their armies before the larger war began. During the first few months, volunteer snipers came to support Ukraine, including a Canadian called “Wali” who had considerable experience from tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. Wali found that the battlefield situation was chaotic and the Ukrainian military didn’t know how to integrate volunteers like him into their order of battle. Most of his time was spent scouting enemy positions for artillery and drone strikes while never making a sniper kill.[49]

The Battle of Bakhmut, fought from July 2022-May 2023, was the deadliest battle fought in Ukraine and typified Russia’s mindset of taking ground at any cost. Overall, Russia lost an estimated 100,000 casualties (dead and wounded) in this urban meatgrinder, the costliest single battle since World War II. The Wagner Group itself lost 20,000 dead with half of these being recruited from prisons.[50] Although Ukraine was on the defensive and inflicted more casualties, they may have lost almost 27,000 killed in action.[51] During the battle, sniping was used extensively by both sides with the Ukrainians becoming noticeably more skilled.[52]

One sniper group working the Ukrainian side were the “Ghosts of Bakhmut.” The group leader previously served as a sniper in Donbas and received several iterations of sniper training from different Western militaries. The 20-man group received a 10-month training course by Western instructors prior to deploying to Bakhmut. Two rifles they preferred using were the American Barret M107A1 semi-automatic .50 (effective range 1,800 m) and the Ukrainian Snipex Alligator bolt-action 14.5 mm (effective range 2,000 m). Both weapon systems allowed for engagement at long distance and the ability to penetrate body armor and urban barriers. From January through September 2023, the group killed an estimated 558 Russian soldiers which they recorded by video through their rifle scopes.[53]



A Ukrainian sniper in Bakhmut uses a teddy bear to stabilize his elbow while shooting an Accuracy International AWM .300 Winchester Magnum.

As seen by the weapons preferred by snipers in Bakhmut, one of the trends in the war was the use of larger and more powerful sniper systems which provided longer stand-off. For example, the Ukrainian company Mayak makes the MCR Horizon's Lord (HL) chambered in a 12.7x114 mm round which is six feet in length and weighs 34 pounds. In 2023, Ukrainian sniper Vyacheslav Kovalsky shot a Russian soldier from 3.8 kilometers with the HL which required a nine-second bullet flight time. He shot the target across the Dnieper River from friendly lines in Kherson. Due to the static nature of the

Kherson front and the barrier provided by the river, the sniper team was able to set up their cumbersome weapon system without fear of being displaced by enemy forces.[54]

It is interesting to note that due to the scale of the war and the ready access to social media, there are many hundreds of sniper videos posted on Telegram, X, and TikTok. As we know, it used to be unusual to see real-time footage of snipers in action and the insurgents in Iraq posting their sniper attacks was a rarity that had unique impact as propaganda. However, that has changed with followers of the war expecting to see sniper videos or "it didn't happen." Because of the deluge of videos capturing the death of so many battlefield victims, one cannot help but become numb to it. Now the shock effect is lost and it's just like watching someone squashing bugs.

A sniper must be careful how they post on social media because they could give their location away. In 2023, during the assault on Soledar, two Wagner soldiers set up a sniper position in a building using an RPK 74 with a suppressor, scope, and a tripod. They then took a video of their weapon system and the urban terrain from their point of view. After posting this on social media, viewers were able to geolocate their position based on the identifiable buildings using Google Earth. Both sides were guilty of carelessly posting first-person shooter point-of-view videos which could be used to help counter-sniper teams or to call in artillery strikes.

Drones and Snipers

Ubiquitous Drone Warfare (UDW) has impacted every aspect of the battlefield in Ukraine and Russia. FPV (First Person View) drones have become the #1 killer of vehicles on the zero line to include tanks, armored and infantry fighting vehicles, and smaller vehicles like ATVs. In some areas of the front, drones compete with artillery and rockets for causing the most casualties among dismounted forces. In the Fall of 2024, on the Sumy front near Kursk, a Ukrainian field doctor noted that more than 90% of the casualties he treated were caused from Russian drone attacks.[55]

UDW has made the battlefield smaller in that it has transformed the mostly 2D environment into a 3D one where persistent surveillance by drones must be assumed. The measures that soldiers take to safeguard themselves like digging trenches, constructing bunkers, and setting up in buildings provide much less protection. This is because drones can drop grenades and bombs on any uncovered position like a foxhole. Also, FPV drones can fly into trenches and bunkers where the subsequent explosion is amplified by the confined space of the dugout. And drone operators have become proficient at flying their drones with large explosive payloads inside buildings where the resulting blast drops the entire structure. The impact on sniper tradecraft has been profound.

From the perspective of concealment, traditional measures are much less effective. Hiding behind an object like a vehicle, vegetation, or a wall doesn’t work anymore if a surveillance drone can identify the shooter. The shooter may be protected from direct line of sight observation and fire, but they are instantly vulnerable to top-down surveillance in this 3D environment. For a drone using a regular day/night camera, perfect camouflage or overhead cover is required to prevent detection.

Drones using thermal cameras, which are very common today, cause considerably more problems for the sniper. While perfect camouflage may work against a day/night camera, it does nothing to hide a shooter’s thermal signature. This obviously means darkness no longer provides concealment for a sniper team moving in the open. Many sniper teams on both sides have been killed by FPV drones with thermal cameras during periods of darkness. In order to survive this 3D thermal environment, sniper teams need to change conceptually how they understand the battlefield and prepare for this reality during pre-mission training.

A Chechen sniper lies dead after being struck by a Ukrainian FPV drone in a counter-sniper operation.

Snipers have increasingly used thermal blankets to conceal their signatures although this is difficult to do during movement because a person's legs are often visible while they are walking. Also, because these blankets reduce thermal signature, drones can detect something that looks cooler than the surrounding area which gives the shooter's position away. Another measure is to set up in a position with near-360 coverage like a building so that the structure hides their thermal signature. This, combined with a thermal blanket, will give the shooter the best chance for concealment.

Drones have become an effective counter-sniper measure on the battlefield. Once a sniper has been detected on the zero line, opposing units will use surveillance drones to pinpoint their location to call in artillery fire or to send in FPV drones. As early as the summer of 2023, Ukrainian snipers near Sumy recognized that Russian drones made their operations nearly impossible. The persistent drone threat forced them to conduct their operations only from urban areas that afforded them top-down concealment and thermal signature reduction.[56]

Ideally, sniper and drone teams can work together to enhance their operations with snipers spotting targets for drones and drones spotting targets for the snipers. Friendly drone operators can also conduct surveillance of their own sniper teams to validate their camouflage and thermal signatures to help protect them from enemy drones who will do the same. Snipers have some advantages in that drones can be defeated with electronic warfare (EW) measures while a carefully aimed bullet cannot.[57] Also, low-flying FPV drones can be heard on the battlefield where the disciplined sniper team is silent. While drones have difficulties flying in very cold and inclement weather, human snipers absorb these hardships and continue to operate. Overall, UDW creates a much more complicated and deadly environment for the sniper.

Russian Sniper Equipment

The Russian sniper corps started the war off with a mixed bag of weapons, ranging from very old to relatively modern. There was no standardized issue of sniper systems so they used whatever they could get their hands on. For instance, during the siege of Mariupol in April 2022, some snipers used WWII-era Mosin-Nagant rifles with equally old PU scopes first manufactured in 1940. The mass-produced Dragunov SVD, which first entered service in 1963, was still widely used by Russian snipers as was its many upgraded variants. And the VSS Vintorez with integral suppressor and chambered for the 9x39 mm round was still used on the battlefield although entering service in 1987.

Around the time of the Chechen Wars (1994-2002), the Russian military began replacing their antiquated Soviet-era sniper systems with newer and more capable rifles manufactured by domestic companies. The models tended to be bolt-action and chambered for larger rounds, much bigger than the standard 7.62 mm size. For example, in 1998, the Russian company Izmesh produce their bolt-action SV-98 rifle chambered in 7.62 mm and .338 magnum.

Although originally designed for police work, it would be used in Ukraine.

In 2000, the KBP Instrument Design Bureau began supplying their semi-automatic OSV-06 12.7 mm anti-material rifle to the Russian military. In 2005, the Russian company Lobaev started selling their bolt-action sniper rifle, chambered in .338 magnum, .375CT, and .408. Another company, ORSIS, made their purpose-built bolt-action T-5000 sniper rifle in 2011, chambered in .300 magnum, .338 magnum, .375CT, and 12.7 mm. And in 2013, the Russian military adopted the 6C8 ASVK “Kord” 12.7 mm bolt-action anti-material sniper rifle which was developed at their Degtyarev Plant in the late 1990s.

While the Russian small-arms industry was producing much higher quality purpose-built sniper rifles, they still lacked the comparative engineering quality of equivalent western weapons. This was illustrated during a precision long-range shooting competition held in annexed Crimea in the summer of 2024. During the 1,600 meter event, 21 out of 36 shooters used foreign made rifles which were broken down as follows: seven shooters used the Desert Tech SRS (American), seven used the Accuracy International AXSR (British), and seven shot the Steyr Mannlicher SSG (Austrian). For the 3,200 meter event, out of 28 participants, eight shooters used the Desert Tech SRS, six shot the Accuracy International AXSR, and another six shot the ORSIS (Russian).[58]

Russia's VSSK has seen little use because of its design for close-in urban counterterror operations.
VSSK 12.7mm w/ integral suppressor & subsonic ammunition

In order to bypass sanctions imposed since 2014 and get access to thousands of much better weapons that they needed for their sniper corps fighting in Ukraine, Russia resorted to something it knew well, economic grayzone warfare. With this, Russian companies purchased sniper systems from adjacent third-party countries who essentially laundered the weapons from Western manufacturers. Since Russia was part of the EAEU Customs Union which included Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, Russian companies could legally buy weapons from them. Importantly, none of these four countries were on the EU's sanctions list.[59]

While Russia bypassed EU and U.S. sanctions (American gun companies sold sniper rifles directly to these third-party countries), their forces in the field acquired Western rifles whenever they could through battlefield recovery. For example, Chechen snipers used captured UAR-10 sniper rifles to target Ukrainian forces trapped in Mariupol. Russian forces also captured the German DSR-1 bullpup sniper rifle, the German HLR .338 rifle made by Haenel, and the excellent Canadian Cadex Defense CDX-33 .338LM sniper system.

These could have been recovered from any number of towns that the Russians overran like Soledar, Bakhmut and Avdiivka.

Ukrainian Sniper Equipment

With the outbreak of all-out war, the Ukrainian military received levels of support from the West that they never had before. This included access to large numbers of military-grade purpose-built sniper systems both for designated marksmen and dedicated snipers. Some weapon systems were sent in volume as part of official military packages while others were purchased privately, often through crowdsourcing campaigns. However, there was no standardization in the often chaotic process. Ukrainian forces received every variety of Western sniper system produced, depending on how and from whom they acquired it.

WM: Winchester Magnum, LM: Lapua Magnum, CT: Chey Tac

Designated Marksman

- M-14, .308, semi-auto (USA)
- DSR-1 Bullpup, .300WM, .308, .338LM, bolt-action (German)
- HK M110A1, .308, semi-auto, SDMR (Squad Designated Marksman Rifle)
- Knight’s Armament M110 SASS, 7.62 mm, semi-auto (USA)

Ukraine acquired a variety of weapons for use in the designated marksmen role which means engaging targets out to 800 meters. These marksmen used a range of weapons as old as the American M-14 rifle to cutting edge systems like the German HKM110. Ukrainian shooters also acquired unknown quantities of the exotic DSR-1 which is used by Germany’s counterterrorist unit GSG9 for urban sniping operations.

Private Purchase

- Ruger Precision Rifle (RPR) .308, .338LM with Nightforce Scopes (USA)
- Victrix Throne, .375CT, bolt action (Italy)
- CADEX Defense CDX-40, .375CT (Canada)

- Desert Tech HTI .375CT, bolt-action (USA)
- McMillan TAC-50, .50, bolt-action (USA)
- Chey Tac M200 Intervention, .408, bolt-action (USA)

Local Ukrainian gun dealers and many other ad hoc groups legally imported hundreds of sniper systems into the country funded by private donations and online crowdfunding. Through this methodology, many purpose-built sniper rifles have made it onto the battlefield like the renowned Desert Tech line of bullpup sniper rifles which are valued by both sides. While private purchases help put highly effective sniper rifles into the hands of frontline shooters, it reveals the inadequacy of the Ukrainian military supply chains.

A Ukrainian sniper trains on a CADEX CDX-40 CBA Shadow in .375CT provided by the Come Back Alive Foundation.

Military Deals

- Barrett M107A1, .50, semi-auto, $41 million deal (USA, 2017)
- Barrett M82A1, .50, .416, semi-auto (USA)
- Prairie Gun Works LRT-3, .50, bolt-action, $1 million deal (Canada, 2018)
- CADEX Defense CDX-50 Tremor, .50, bolt-action (Canada, 2020)
- Accuracy International AWM, .300WM, bolt-action (Netherlands, 2022)

- Sako TRG-42, .338LM, .375CT, bolt-action (Estonia, 2023)
- CADEX Defense CDX-33, bolt-action (Canada, 2023)
- VCD10, .308, semi-auto (France, 2000 units, unfulfilled, 2024)
- Haenel HLR .338LM, bolt-action (Germany, 420 units, 2025)
- CZ TSR, .308, bolt-action (Czech)
- Steyr HS 50 (Austria, Main Intelligence Directorate-HUR details unknown)

Ukraine purchased or received thousands of purpose-built sniper rifles from a variety of countries with the majority likely coming from the U.S. in the form of Barrett products. While these are just a sampling of the weapons received through official military sales, many of these same models are also purchased through private dealers. Foreign countries have provided Ukraine access to their top-of-the line sniper products to include thermal scopes and suppressors.

Ukrainian

- Tactical Systems .308, .338, bolt-action (Brugger & Thomet APR copy)
- UKROP Zbroyar Z-008 VPR, .300WM, .338LM bolt-action
- UAR-10, 7.62 mm, semi-auto
- Horizon’s Lord, 12.7 mm, bolt-action
- Snipex Alligator 12.7 mm, bolt action
- Snipex Monomakh 14.5 mm, semi-auto
- Snipex T-Rex 14.5 mm, bolt-action, single shot

Ukraine developed an excellent line of designated marksmen rifles with their UAR-10 and accompanying domestically manufactured ammunition. However, they need to produce more of them to push out the continued use of substandard weapons like the SVD. The Ukrainian domestic arms industry has effectively countered Russia’s own arsenal of long-distance anti-material weapons with their Snipex line of products as well as other lesser known brands.

Unconventional Warfare

Despite having an active underground resistance movement in areas occupied by Russia and in Russia itself, there is little evidence that irregular forces have employed sniping activity. This is despite having access to several appropriate systems like folding stock rifles through the black market or from Ukrainian intelligence services. Russia also has intelligence assets embedded in Ukrainian society who can and do conduct clandestine activity. In one example, the Ukrainian SBU arrested a suspected Russian agent in February 2022 near Mariupol transporting a suppressed Z-10 sniper rifle. Let’s look at several reported covert attacks to see how they were conducted and determine their feasibility for sniper operations.

Aleksandr Dugin is a political scientist and Russian nationalist ideologue who publicly supported Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its ongoing invasion of Ukraine. His daughter, Daraya Dugina, was also an outspoken supporter of the Russian invasion and was considered a Kremlin propagandist by Ukraine. On August 20, 2022, they both attended an art festival outside of Moscow. When Daraya returned to her car, it exploded, killing her instantly. Her father was supposed to depart with her, but decided not to, indicating he may have been the target.

Russian FSB investigators allege one of the assassins was a Ukrainian woman who rented a room a month earlier in the same apartment building as Daraya to develop her pattern of life through surveillance. Another man was accused of building an improvised explosive device (IED) in a rented garage in Moscow which was used in the attack. The woman followed Daraya to the festival, planted the IED, and then remotely detonated it when Daraya entered the car. Both the man and woman successfully escaped to Estonia, avoiding capture. The FSB was able to piece together the chain of events after studying local CCTV video footage.[60]

A Ukrainian soldier holds a captured Russian VSSM 9x39 mm rifle with integral suppressor which is ideal for clandestine sniper activity.

If we assume the woman was in her own car with line of sight to the victim, then she could have fired a rifle as well. Elimination by a suppressed weapon would have been less noticeable to the nearby people and may have improved her chances for immediately escaping the scene. Regardless, the assassination team determined it was easier to attach a magnetic IED with a greater certainty of terminating their target. Both attack types, rifle or IED, have similar forensic and evidentiary risks that need to be mitigated after the event.

Mikhail Shatsky was the Deputy General Designer for the Mars Design Bureau involved in the modernization of Russia's cruise missile and drone programs used to attack Ukraine. This meant he was a known personality to Ukrainian security services. At some point, he was placed under surveillance by intelligence assets in Moscow. It was a dark night on December 12, 2024, when he went for a walk in a nearby park for reasons unknown. It may have been something he usually did or he went to meet somebody, either way, it was the last thing he ever did as he was shot and killed on his walk.[61]

The snowy park consisted of thick woods and presumedly had no cameras. This meant a person could walk up to Shatsky, perhaps passing him on the trail, and shoot him point blank and then simply keep walking. A shooter out on a cold winter night could wear any number of normal clothing articles to hide their identity like a scarf, hat, hoodie, or even a balaclava. Subsequent reporting indicated that the Ukrainian military intelligence service (GRU) conducted the hit. In similar circumstances, former Ukrainian politician Illia Kyva who defected to Russia was shot and killed in a park at close range with a Glock 9 mm in December 2023.[62]

As with the Dugin hit, this operation required low skills as someone merely had to walk up to their target and fire a weapon several feet away. The thick woods and cool moist night (cold air is denser and limits sound travel) helped conceal the gunshots. Because it was dark and the shooter concealed their identity, they were willing to take the risk of being in close proximity to their target. Although it obviously wasn’t required, they could have taken further measures to disassociate themselves from the act like firing from a distance with a rifle.

Russian Lieutenant General Kirillov was on Ukraine’s hit list because he commanded Russia’s Chemical, Biological, and Nuclear Defense Forces and was accused of using banned chemical weapons against Ukrainian forces. On the morning of December 17, 2024, Russian Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov left his Moscow apartment building with an associate. After taking several steps outside, an electric scooter parked near the door detonated, killing both of them in a violent explosion.

Russian FSB investigators arrested a 29 year-old Uzbek man who allegedly admitted to conducting the assassination as a recruited Ukrainian asset.[63] The man set up a wi-fi camera in a rented ride-sharing car outside Kirillov’s residence in order to determine his pattern of life through remote surveillance. The man was provided an IED to place on the scooter by unidentified accomplices which he then remotely detonated when observing Kirillov exit the building. Ukraine later took responsibility for the attack.

AS VAL 9x39 mm w/ integral suppressor & folding stock

In 2023, Ukrainian police detained a man in Kyiv with a disassembled AS VAL w/ blue-tip 7NP armor piercing ammo.

From the perspective of Ukrainian intelligence services, this attack required relatively low skills. All they needed the assassin to do was park a car with a wi-fi camera, attach an IED to an electric scooter, and then press a button. While the remote detonation was done to physically disassociate the assassin from the act, the FSB managed to bridge that evidentiary gap, most likely through CCTV analysis. In comparison, accurately firing a concealed rifle under stress requires higher skills and more training. Ukraine determined that a remote IED attack had the highest chance of success.

Final Thoughts

The Russo-Ukraine war kicked off in 2014 with the use of covert sniping during the Maidan Revolution to sow fear and anger to engineer a desired political outcome. Hidden shooters were able to manipulate the complex urban terrain to conceal their identities and disassociate themselves from their activity. Only a through an effective post-shooting investigation that exploited available forensic evidence could these shooters be identified and charged through the legal system. However, political barriers prevented this so the snipers remain at large to this day.

Although it went largely unnoticed, the war in the Donbas from 2014-2022 provided critical insights as to what future sniping warfare would become. The Russians led the way and used the conflict to train their snipers and hone their tactics, becoming so deadly that in some parts of the zero line they caused the majority of casualties. The story of the Donbas for the Ukrainians was them evolving their non-existent sniper capability from an ad-hoc group of amateur marksman to a highly-trained corps of professional shooters. Perhaps the most overlooked part of the Donbas War was the increasing use of drones by the Russians.

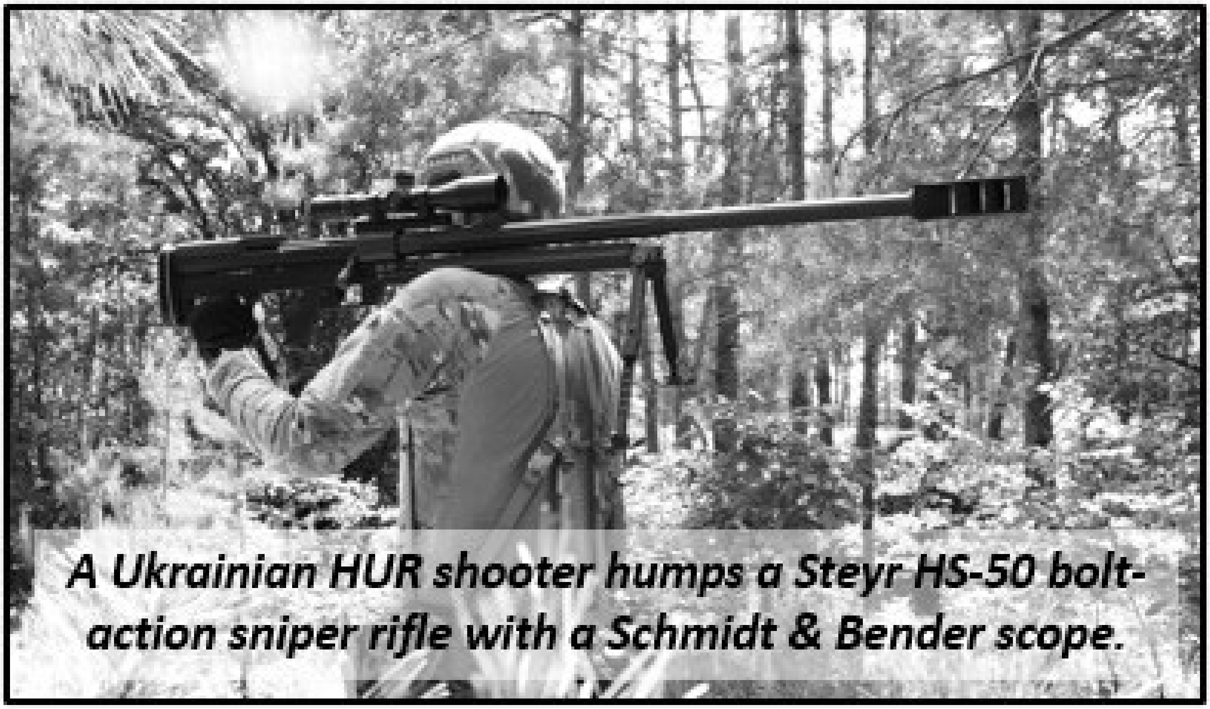
The expansion of the war in 2022 led to both sides growing their sniping efforts at a massive scale which had not been seen since WWII. The overall sniper war evolved into its deadliest form with a trend toward much larger caliber rifles, suppressors as a standard tool, and the prolific use of advanced optics to include thermal sights. This meant that snipers could hit their targets further out, their positions remained concealed, and darkness provided no protection to the enemy.

Also, both sides had continuing access to very high-quality and well-engineered sniper systems for both designated marksmen and trained snipers. Overall, Western-made systems were considered top-of-the-line with both sides working to secure the best rifles from American, Canadian, German, and other Western sellers. Notably, both Russia and Ukraine developed their own domestic manufacturing base which produced competently designed sniper systems.

Without a question, the most significant impact on the art of sniping was the implementation of Ubiquitous Drone Warfare (UDW). When the zero line became saturated with drones with thermal cameras, snipers using traditional tradecraft became easy targets. Due to this 3D environment, snipers set up in open terrain were either pushed back or had to transition to urban areas for protection. In many cases, drones replaced snipers when it came to targeting the enemy. FPV drones had much greater range and could get to a target quickly with a large explosive payload with zero risk to the operator.

When it came to covert action, the Ukrainian intelligence service and underground resistance groups preferred to use IEDs and close-up attacks as opposed to firing from a distance. This was due partly to the unique characteristics of each operation and the need for recruited assets to conduct low-skill attacks. At times, an arm’s length shooting in an isolated location was clearly required. However, there were definitely situations where an urban sniper using sound tradecraft could provide the desired results.

The war in Ukraine and the evolution of sniper tradecraft is much different than when I was on a Special Forces Urban Warfare A-Team and deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the GWOT. In the early 2000s, using a suppressor was uncommon and seeing a Barret .50 somewhat of a novelty. Times have changed. Those interested in the subject must continue to study it and learn from ongoing conflicts. I leave it to the reader to assess who is doing better in the ongoing sniper war, Ukraine or Russia? I also challenge the reader to see where the art of sniping is trending and how it will continue to evolve.



A Ukrainian HUR shooter humps a Steyr HS-50 bolt-action sniper rifle with a Schmidt & Bender scope.

Chapter 22

The Gaza War

Death in a Small Place

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups conducted a surprise attack against Israel codenamed “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.” They staged their attack from the Gaza Strip with an estimated 6,000 fighters and the goal of conducting a sweeping attack all the way to the West Bank. While Israel received many intelligence reports about the attack prior to it happening, these were ignored by the Israel security establishment who suffered from institutional complacency, groupthink, and a “yes man” culture. While the ambitious offense stalled far short of their goals, local Israeli defenses collapsed with Hamas killing almost 1,200 people and capturing another 250 Israeli soldiers and civilians.[64]

While the initial Israeli response was confused and lethargic, Hamas had to know that the eventual response would be massive with the full weight of the Israeli state behind it. Israeli security forces spent several weeks clearing its territory of Palestinian fighters and bombing targets in Gaza while they prepared for a much larger operation. On October 27, Israel launched its full-scale invasion of Gaza with a combined armed assault involving aircraft, drones, naval forces, armor, and infantry. Israel’s goals included the destruction of Hamas, freeing their hostages, and eliminating Gaza as a future threat.

Because the majority of the 2.2 million Palestinians lived in built-up areas, the conflict would mostly be an urban war. This also meant that trying to separate Hamas from the population would be complicated and costly for both sides. While Israeli forces tried to systematically clear Gaza while identifying and killing Palestinian militants, they were unable to do so with guerillas emerging and conducting attacks from rear areas that had already been cleared. In a major operation, Israel surrounded Gaza City in November 2023 in an attempt to clear it of Hamas but failed to do so and lifted the siege in January 2025. The city's complex urban terrain occupied by 500,000 people and defended by fighters who used an extensive network of underground tunnels defied conquest.

As a subset of the tactics used in the war, urban sniper operations were used extensively by both sides. Hamas and its allies employed snipers to disrupt Israeli operations, attrit their enemy's strength, and as a means for information warfare. Hamas shooters exhibited a wide range of competence from the terminally inept with dated sniper rifles to highly skilled marksmen with large-caliber systems. Israel integrated sniping by designated marksmen into their regular operations while also employing highly-trained professional sniper units with unlimited budgets who eliminated high-priority targets.

Gaza Strip, October 29, 2023

Israel quickly used its overwhelming firepower to rubble large parts of the Gaza Strip creating an urban disaster rivaling Stalingrad, Grozny and Bakhmut.

Hamas' Sniper Campaign[65]

While the exact number of snipers employed by Hamas is unknown it's probably several hundred. Sniping is a natural tactic for them because of its asymmetric nature that allows them to remain concealed (in most situations) while targeting a much larger and capable force. Also, the dense urban geography lends itself to the art, providing a multitude of covered positions, many of which lie out of reach of Israeli security forces. Since Hamas knows their cities intimately, they are able to manipulate the terrain, moving from building to building and through underground tunnels to gain access to ideal sniping positions. Let’s discuss how a competent team goes about their business.

The first stage of the operation is surveillance where Hamas lookouts in civilian clothes blend in with the civilian population to observe where the zero line is (the front line trace of troops). These lookouts may be Hamas members or merely supporters of the cause like teenagers who can move freely in the area. Their job is to identify what buildings are occupied by Israeli forces to include their exact location like what floor and what room they occupy and if they are visible from a specific window. The lookouts then relay this information to the sniping team while maintaining continuing awareness of the identified enemy positions as this may change quickly.

The sniping team then sends out a scout to confirm the information and to select proposed firing positions for the shooter. The ideal position should be as far away from the enemy as possible but still within the range capability of the shooter. The position should also have some sort of barrier between it and the enemy like other buildings, their own forces, or a road that is under fire control by them. This barrier gives them the space and time to set up their position, which must be done in a methodical manner if they want to be successful and do this more than once. Any mistakes can lead to their death by the better trained Israelis who have their own experienced sniper teams.

Next, the spotter, who is also an experienced sniper, confirms the position and prepares it for the shooter. If the zero line is static like it was during the Israeli siege of Gaza City, the position can be set up under cover of darkness to conceal this activity. A firing portal is identified like a window or a loophole. Preparation includes setting up a shooting platform like a desk, chair or mattress (whatever material is available in the building) to stabilize the weapon and accommodate the human that must pull the trigger. Concealment is prepared like drapes or netting so that the shooter cannot be detected visually. The spotter takes a video of the position with his cellphone to show the shooter when he briefs them on the plan.

After the lookouts confirm the situation, the sniper team moves into position which includes the shooter, the spotter, and a lookout. The lookout guides the team to their position and ensures the route is clear and then provides security on the ground floor of the building. The spotter guides the shooter into the position, helps them set up their weapons system, and begins to search for and identify their target. Depending on what security measures the Israeli forces are implementing, a target could become available immediately or many hours later. While the Israelis should operate under the assumption that they are always under sniper surveillance, they make mistakes.

Let's say an Israeli soldier makes the mistake of standing in front of an open window for whatever reason (the windows have all been blown out so there is no glass).[66] This scenario most likely takes place during daylight hours as Hamas has few if any night vision scopes. The spotter observes this and relays it to the sniper. The shooter gets on target, takes aim, and makes the shot. The spotter, who previously set up a hand-held camera, films the attack. Since the shooter isn't using a suppressor, their position is now possibly compromised. They quickly reverse the process with the sniper (they keep the expended cartridge in the rifle to retain this forensic evidence) and the spotter returning to the ground floor. All three exit the area using a covered and concealed route and return to a safe location where the video will be modified and uploaded to the internet for information warfare purposes.[67]

A Hamas sniper wearing hearing protection prepares to make a shot for the camera. Notice the mesh netting in the front that conceals their position from observation.

Sniper Weapons

Like all movements, Hamas used a variety of weapons depending what countries would supply them and how they could smuggle them in. Because Israel implemented a complete land blockade around the Gaza Strip except for one entrance managed by Egypt and one managed by Israel, the Palestinians had a problem getting in illegal material. Further isolating Gaza was the fact that the Gaza international airport was closed since 2002 and Israel had enforced a nautical no-access zone. This meant contraband had to move in through underground tunnels connecting Egypt, by small boats running the naval blockade, and with non-standard aircraft like drones.[68] While it was difficult, Hamas was still able to bring in weapons but not in the volume or quality that they wanted.

American weapons in Hamas' possession included different variants of the M-14, M-16, AR-15, and M-4 rifles which were most likely retrieved from ambushed Israeli forces or partially fabricated in

Gaza by local underground gunsmiths. Russian weapons included every variety of AK-47, Mosin-Nagant 91/30s, SVDs and Romanian PSLs with some of these hanging around in Hamas arsenals for decades. The flow of Russian weapons is suspected to go from Moscow to Tehran and them smuggled into Gaza over the course of many years.[69] Also, Hamas’ spokesman Ali Baraka stated that Russia granted them permission to produce their own locally produced AK-47 rounds.

While Hamas made do with mid-quality weapons that were adequate for close-in urban sniping, they also received several of China’s purpose-built Zijiang M99 .50 sniper rifle. In 2024, Hamas posted videos of their snipers shooting at Israeli soldiers using the M99 with social media accounts claiming the rifles were imported from Iran.[70] We also know M99s were used in Sudan and Syria, all with strong Iranian IRGC connections, which makes it likely they were smuggled into Gaza with help from Tehran. Most followers on the topic agree Beijing did not ship these weapons directly to Gaza but concede that Chinese black market arms dealers could have.

Another aspect of accurate shooting is having good optics to place on a weapon which Hamas seemed to have ready access to. For sure, rifle scopes are treated much differently than weapons in that they are considered dual-use and are sold and bought around the world more freely. From a practical smuggling aspect, they are a relatively small item and can be concealed with legitimate goods or even brought in on one’s person. In 2024, Israeli forces captured a Hamas sniper rifle with an Elements Optics scope, made by a U.S. company with authorized distributors in Iran despite export restrictions that were in place. High quality glass was making its way into Gaza.[71]

The Steyr HS-50 and the Ghoul

Although Hamas gained access to many different kinds of weapon systems adequate for sniping operations, the one rifle that came to define its sniping enterprise was the Steyr HS-50. The story begins in 2005 when the Austrian gunmaker inexplicably sold 800 units of their well-engineered .50 bolt-action sniper rifle to Iran for “anti-terror and counter-drug units.” Soon after receiving this shipment, Iran reverse engineered the weapons and manufactured their own unlicensed copies called the AM-50 “Sayyad” (Hunter in Persian). Tehran then shipped these copies to Shiite militias in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime, the Houthis in Yemen, and eventually Hamas.[72] As an example of their effect, U.S. forces captured more than 100 of the AM-50s which they estimated had killed 170 American and British soldiers in Iraq as of 2007.[73]

كل عين فينا
هو قناص

The Al-Quds Brigade (the armed wing of Palestinian Islamic Jihad) published this poster of a fighter carrying an Iranian-made AM-50 in 2023.

In 2014, Hamas begin receiving unknown quantities of AM-50s from Iran through their established smuggling networks. These acquisitions immediately upgraded the Hamas sniper arsenal and became their most potent rifle providing far more capability than anything else they had previously. The AM-50 allowed them to take long-distance shots out to 2,000 meters which was important considering that Israel had upgraded its fence system surrounding Gaza. With a wider buffer zone, Hamas snipers needed to jump this further distance to reach Israeli border guards and military units patrolling the zero line.

After receiving the AM-50, Iran then transferred the engineering specifications of the rifle to Hamas so that they could make their own versions in Gaza and not worry about smuggling in the Iranian copies.[74] Hamas manufactured their own versions chambered originally in 14.5 mm and then subsequently in 12.7 mm which they called the “Ghoul” after the former Hamas weapons engineer Yahya Mahmoud Jaber-al-Ghoul who was killed in attack by an Israeli AH-64 Apache helicopter in 2004. Four months after the Gaza War began, Hamas stated that they had conducted 57 successful sniper operations against Israeli soldiers and 34 of these were using their Ghoul rifle.[75]

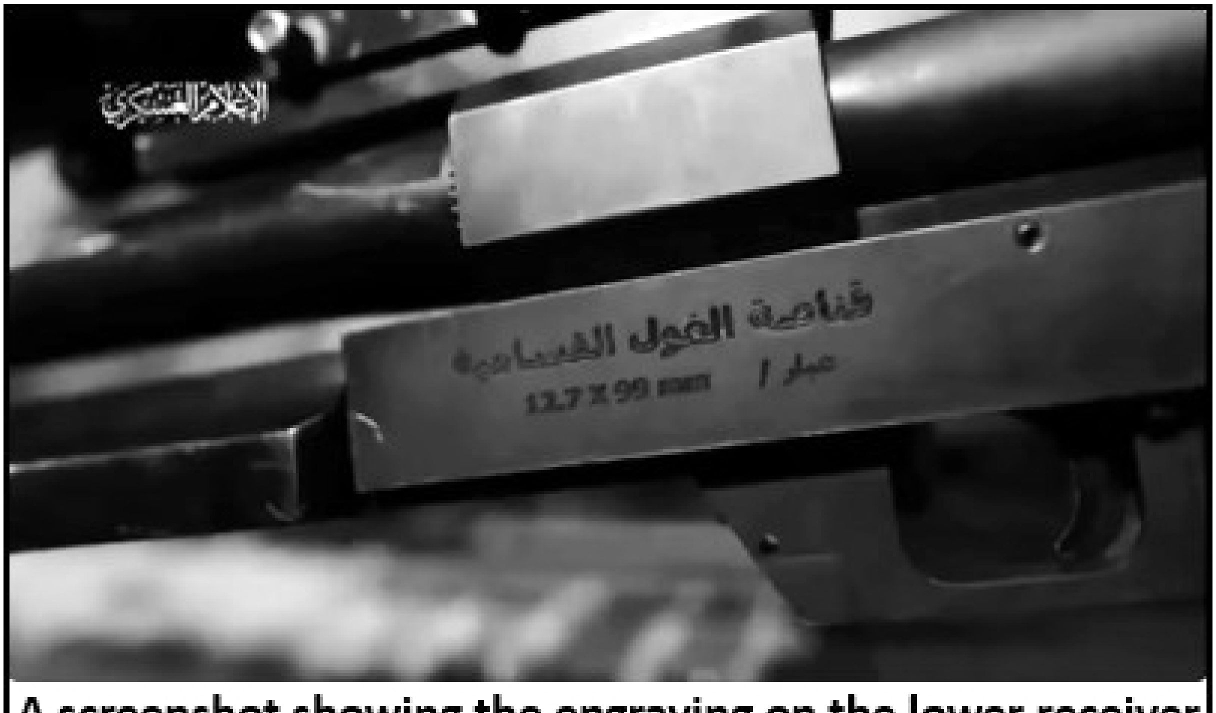
Gun Manufacturing in Gaza?

In December 2023, Hamas posted a video of an underground weapons manufacturing facility with their own gunsmiths (wearing balaclavas to hide their identities) making Ghoul sniper rifles and handloading its accompanying ammunition. The video showed different parts of the gun manufacturing process like drilling out gun barrels, milling upper receivers and then final assembly. The ammunition process was also displayed showing casings with original headstamps, inserting the primer, filling the case with gunpowder, and inserting the bullet. The final scene showed six Hamas snipers on a rifle range shooting metal targets with the final products. It was a slick video but was it true?

Gun enthusiasts with industry knowledge immediately dismissed the video as unauthentic and an attempt to show an indigenous manufacturing capability Hamas simply didn’t have.[76] To start, gun barrels (bar stock) were shown turning on a lathe which addresses the exterior diameter of the barrel with the understanding the boring and rifling process is done first by professional gun manufacturers. A subsequent scene shows a worker drilling into a bolt head but a detailed breakdown of the film reveals that this piece was most likely already a finished part and no actual original drilling occurred.

Other footage reveals workers milling a blank metal profile which was most likely used to fabricate the bottom and top pieces of a scope mount. Then we see finished bolt head assemblies (already gun blued) being put together as well as the clam shell muzzle brakes, although there is no actual shots of these being manufactured. What could also be an actual process was the engraving on the side of the receiver that said in Arabic "Al-Qassam's Al-Ghoul Sniper Rifle 12.7 x 99 mm." From the video, the only things that were possibly fabricated by Hamas were the scope mounts and the receiver engravings – that's it. Let's move on to the ammo.

It appears that the workers are using steel casings which are more difficult to work with and tend to have jamming problems, but with the single-shot AM-50 this isn't a concern. While one headstamp was shown to the audience with "Qassam 12.7", other cartridges didn't show this stamping, indicating one was done for display purposes. Also, the bullet seating process appeared unconvincing in that it looks like the worker is merely going through the process to convince the viewer they are doing their own handloading. The individual rounds are then placed in full ammo crates which indicates that they really smuggled in .50 ammo already made in Iran.



A screenshot showing the engraving on the lower receiver to convince viewers Hamas manufactured this rifle.

In summary, it appears the actors in the video disassembled existing AM-50s manufactured in Iran and reassembled them in the video while splicing in different manufacturing scenes to convince the viewer of a complete fabrication process that doesn't exist.[77] This was done to convince viewers the movement was more capable than it was and to also deflect from continuing Iranian support. This also served to condition the community to the idea that since Hamas could make its own precision sniper rifles, other weapons found on the battlefield were actually made by them and not imported by their allies like Iran. What do we mean by this?

Since Iran manufactures their own 14.5 mm Shaher and 19 mm Arash anti-material sniper rifles, if and when these were used in Gaza to kill Israeli soldiers, it benefitted Hamas if people thought they had manufactured them. As discussed, this would be an effort to take the spotlight away from both Hamas' and Iran's gun smuggling networks. This could also take pressure off the fact Iran has made its own knock-offs of the Barrett .50 called the Hoveizeh HVZ-0003-R. Also, a domestic manufacturing narrative could help with future discovery of Iran's massive 23 mm Baher-23 rifle that is normally fired from a tripod. Regardless, it is likely that larger sniper files made by Iran will eventually be smuggled into Gaza and used by Hamas.

Shoot to Thrill

While Hamas would like to kill as many Israeli soldiers through sniping as possible to weaken their forces and lower their overall morale, the truth is that snipers accounted for a relatively minor number of overall casualties. Sniper rifles couldn't blow up a tank, they had a finite range requiring a skilled operator, and good shooters attracted a lot of attention by Israel's own sniper corps. Despite this reality, it was important to create the impression that Hamas snipers were expert shooters hiding in every window and that Israeli soldiers on the zero line should live in constant fear. And a steady stream of sniper victories, both real and imagined, served to raise the morale of the civilian population who could see the war was going badly.

Hamas' strategy was simple and was the same as used by the various guerilla movements in the Syrian Civil War. To start, Hamas intentionally set up their sniping operations with the intent of filming them for information warfare purposes. After filming an attack, Hamas edited the video for dramatic effect and then publicly released it or they spliced together a series of sniper attacks for more impact. The finished video was uploaded to popular social media platforms like X and YouTube which could go viral if viewers forwarded them to other platforms like Reddit and Telegram. With the advent of modern technology, any tech-savvy teenager could create these videos and then make them available to millions of viewers. It was easy.

From analyzing Hamas' many sniper attack videos, we can see they haven't figured out how to film their operations from their rifle scopes despite the technology being available. This could be for several reasons such as these types of scopes are relatively unique and thus harder to acquire and smuggle in. It is also interesting to note that Hamas hasn't posted any night vision sniper attacks, indicating they haven't acquired this technology yet although it too is widely available. I think Hamas hasn't yet made the conceptual leap to these other techniques and suffers from their own groupthink where their daytime sniper attacks with an accompanying cameraman works well enough. Maybe Hamas shooters are unable to cut through the red-tape of their own guerrilla bureaucracy.

By reverse engineering Hamas' many videos we see that their snipers don't usually make incredibly skilled shots but merely capitalize on the mistakes made by Israeli soldiers who expose themselves to the direct line of sight of their enemy for extended periods. Hamas has also used their videos for shitposting where one sniper dared Benajmin Netanyahu to send his son Yair into Gaza so he could shoot him. Hamas has also posted videos of their snipers missing their targets which doesn't make much sense. However, they might calculate that it is better to post a video of an Israeli soldier reacting in fear to a near miss than not posting any video at all. Ultimately, Hamas understands the importance of exporting its sniper attacks to the widest audience possible which is easily facilitated by modern technology and social media accounts.

A Hamas shooter with an AM-50 poses for the camera. The movement has widely advertised its use of large-caliber sniper rifles to promote an image of strength.

Counter-Sniping Operations

In a chaotic warzone, counter-sniper operations can be anything that removes an opposing shooter from the battlefield. Often times this is a reactionary ad hoc process by soldiers under fire as opposed to a deliberate or systematic plan. Rarely do we see the mythical one-on-one sniper deal that the Red Army crafted for Vasily Zaitsev at the Battle of Stalingrad. However, sometimes we do. In one instance, a Hamas sniper was located in a building with a loophole enabling him to see and shoot out of it while remaining concealed. Directly across from him was an Israeli sniper also in a concealed position looking out from a loophole although his position was elevated one story higher. The Hamas sniper took a shot that impacted inside the loophole but because of the angle, most likely went too high. Likewise, because the Hamas sniper was deep enough in the room, the Israeli sniper shooting downward would most likely miss as well. We’ll never know how it ended because the video cut immediately afterwards.[78]

In another example, a group of Israeli soldiers with designated marksmen set themselves up in an urban outpost so that they were visible and in a static position. Because they now formed the zero line, a Hamas element had time to target them with a deliberate approach. After lookouts pinpointed their position, they brough this information back to their command post where they went through a hasty planning process using Google Earth and urban mapping software to pinpoint the building, the floor within the building, and the exact room the Israelis were in. Hamas then sent an RPG team within range of the outpost and launched a rocket right through window which must have killed or wounded everyone in the room. Sometimes the best way to get a sniper is with an RPG.

In a third instance, in 2021, an Israeli Border Police designated marksman was using a loophole in a security wall to aim his M4 rifle through.[79] This was bad tactics by the marksman because his rifle barrel stuck out at least a foot and a mob of Palestinians in front of the wall could clearly see the rifle and were hitting it with sticks. He should have pulled his rifle back and repositioned, but he didn’t. Then, a Hamas member in the mob blindly held up a pistol to the loophole and pulled the trigger three times, hitting the marksman in the head who died nine days later. In January 2025, the body of the Hamas gunman, Muhammad Maher Abu Jasser, was found in Gaza although the date of his actual death was unknown.

Israel’s Sniper Enterprise

Israel has decades of sniper experience while fighting Hamas, Fatah, the PLO and any number of other Islamic military groups over the past decades. Just like Hamas, Israel employs designated marksmen among their infantry who generally use assault rifles like M-4s with ready access to suppressors and optics. Because Israel is a comparatively wealthy nation-state as opposed to Hamas, they have access to large numbers of high-quality equipment from the U.S., Europe, and what they manufacture domestically. Israel also has professionally trained sniper units who have received some of the best equipment and training in the world. For these reasons, Israel's sniper corps has a much higher average quality than that of Hamas.

An Israeli soldier in Gaza aims a Barrett REC10 .308 semi-automatic rifle w/ Leupold scope and Huxwrx can.

"Less-than-lethal" Sniping

During the Palestinian mass demonstrations of the First Intifada 1987-1993, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) sought a weapon that was more potent than firing rubber coated bullets but less lethal than their standard M-16 variant 5.56 mm assault rifles. The IDF ultimately choose to purchase and employ the Ruger 10/22 semi-automatic rifle with integral suppressor, bipod, and 4x scope.[80] The IDF subsequently implemented a widespread policy of its snipers shooting Palestinian protestors in the legs with its .22LR rifles as a less-than-lethal means. During this period, the IDF killed 1,070 Palestinians and wounded up to 100,000.[81] An estimated 6,500 minors were shot by the IDF from 1987-1989 alone.[82]

During the initial phase of the Second Intifada from 2000-2005, the IDF continued to employ the Ruger 10/22 widely. However, in 2001, the Israeli advocate general prohibited the use of Ruger 10/22s as a non-lethal means and ruled that it was not a means for riot control. The IDF subsequently said the employment of .22 ammunition was classified but was similar to the rules pertaining to other "ordinary" ammunition.[83] While the use of .22 ammunition was officially suspended from 2001-2008, its practice still continued by troops in the field.

By 2009, the Ruger 10/22 was again being used widely in the field by IDF snipers to disperse Palestinians in violation of established military regulations which were simply ignored. To get an understanding of the massive scale that the IDF used the Ruger 10/22, from August 2008-December 2009, the IDF spent 1.3 million NIS ($377k USD) on .22LR ammunition. If each round cost an average of 0.10 cents, the IDF purchased 3.7 million rounds of ammunition.[84] That meant the IDF fired 217,000 rounds a month. Also in 2009, Ruger produced their Ruger SR-22 which was a tactical version of their original rifle based on the AR design. Several years later, the IDF purchased and began using these newer models.

In the occupied territories, which means the West Bank although it used to include Gaza until 2005, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) operated under the Open Fire Policy (OFP). The OFP allowed the IDF to shoot to kill to save their own lives or those of others if no other options were available. During arrest operations, the IDF was allowed to shoot Palestinians as a last resort and then only in their legs. During the period from 2000-2010, the IDF killed an estimated 6,371 Palestinians and wounded an unknown number although significantly higher.[85]

In 2018, Palestinian activists organized a series of peaceful demonstrations that included the intent to cross the separation fence that divided Gaza and Israel. In response, Israel publicly announced the deployment of 100 additional snipers to the fence in preparation for an increased threat by Hamas. The OFP remained in effect and was expanded to allow snipers to shoot in the legs “main inciters” to prevent demonstrators from crossing the fence from Gaza into Israel. The IDF was also allowed to use lethal force against demonstrators “directly participating in hostilities.”

From March 30-December 31, 2018, 183 Palestinians were killed by live ammunition, 6,106 were wounded, 1,576 sustained injuries from bullet fragments, 438 were wounded by rubber-coated bullets, and 1,084 were injured from direct hits by tear-gas canisters. Of these numbers, 12 died from leg shots while another 4,903 were wounded from the same. Of those wounded, 21 became paralyzed and 122 had one or more legs amputated. 29 of those killed were identified as being members of Palestinian militias. During this period, no IDF soldiers were killed.[86]

Because of these experiences, Israel had a large and skilled cadre of Ruger 10/22 shooters based on decades of constant employment. While the IDF used the rifle extensively to target protestors, it was also effective for a close-in urban environment, especially when a quiet shot was required. In the field, IDF soldiers carried their standard M4 for regular use and then the Ruger 10/22 as a secondary weapon. Because it's so light, it was normally slung over the back. Israel continues to use the Ruger 10/22 through the current war in both the SR-22 model and as an upgrade to the original rifle.

An Israeli Border Police (MAGAV) takes aim with a well-used Ruger 10/22 with extended 25-round magazine.

Yahya Sinwar – A Sniper's Victim

Sinwar was a legitimate Hamas OG, having grown up in a Gaza refugee camp and then joining the Al-Qassam Brigades from 1987 until his death in 2024.[87] Part of his street cred included doing 22 years in an Israeli prison for killing two Israeli soldiers and four

Palestinian collaborators. Sinwar was released in a 2011 prisoner exchange and eventually worked his way to the top of the organization to become the second leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip from 2017-2024. As such, he was one of the chief architects of the Hamas attack in 2023 and the cause of the ongoing war. Sinwar was a hardliner throughout his career, remaining dedicated to the eradication of the Israeli state.

Once the war started, Sinwar was a dead man walking as Israeli forces combed the streets for him in his hometown of Khan Yunis – and he knew it. However, the urban terrain was so dense and complex, combined with a network of underground tunnels, the Israelis found conducting operations there difficult. Israel put a $400,000 bounty on Sinwar's head as rumors spread that he was moving in the underground tunnel systems, staying one step of the IDF but unable to effectively command Hamas.

On October 16, 2024, an Israeli foot patrol in the southern Gaza city of Rafah encountered by chance three unidentified Palestinian men leaving a building and then opened fire on them. The three men scattered with one man entering a building alone. The Israeli patrol attempted to enter the building in pursuit but were met with hand grenades from the top floor so they pulled back. The Israelis then flew a drone into the second story of the partially destroyed building to confirm the location of the unidentified man. They then directed fire at the man from a nearby Merkava tank who opened fire from point blank range. Meanwhile, a sniper maneuvered into position in an adjacent building and shot the man in the head.

The following day, an IDF patrol entered and searched the building, finding a dead man lying on the second-story floor. Although the man resembled Sinwar, they were unsure. To confirm his identity, they cut off one of his fingers on his left hand and sent it to be examined for DNA which came back as a positive match. A subsequent autopsy by Israel's Chief Pathologist Dr. Chen Kugel revealed Sinwar hadn't eaten for three days, had an injured left leg from the building collapsing, suffered shrapnel wounds to his chest, and his right arm and hand had been wounded. He also confirmed that the chief cause of death was traumatic brain injury from a gunshot to the head as the bullet was still lodged in his brain.[88]

The IDF released pictures of their men standing over Sinwar’s battered corpse to include his missing finger to show their conquest of Hamas. They also released the drone video showing Sinwar’s last moments before he was killed, hoping to portray him as a defeated man and coward. However, the last known footage of him alive showed him throwing a stick at the drone with his left hand as a final act of defiance. The Palestinians instead took this as confirmation that he fought to the bitter end, meeting his end through the scope of an Israeli sniper.[89]

The ”Refaim 9” Ghost Unit

Israel deployed professionally trained, dedicated sniper units against Hamas during the Gaza War. One of these was the Ghost Unit, the 9th Platoon from the 202nd Tzefa Battalion of the 35th Paratroopers Brigade which ultimately fell under the 98th Paratroopers Division which is a reserve unit. The 35th Brigade is an elite volunteer unit requiring new recruits to pass a rigorous selection process that is run twice a year. Sniper units within the Brigade are themselves considered elite units that go through an additional rigorous physical selection process. As part of their training, these units compete in organized sniper competitions that test their physical endurance and their ability to make accurate shots at different distances which are known as “stress shoots.”

The Ghost Unit consisted of 20 young men with most of the unit consisting of foreign volunteers: five from Europe, three from the U.S., and one each from South Africa, Ethiopia, and Azerbaijan (a total of 11). Because of their geographic diversity, their common language was Hebrew which improved over time. Most of the foreign recruits had no military background so they had to be trained from scratch. While the Ghost Unit had adequate equipment issued by the Israeli military, they still didn’t have everything they needed. Consequently, one of the American’s parent started a non-profit called “Friends of Paratrooper Sniper Unit 202” to raise money for items that included sniper stands, scopes, and silencers. By the end of 2023, the non-profit had raised $304,000 in sniper gear which they sent over to the Ghost Unit in Israel.[90]

by March 30 Movement

A Ghost Unit sniper in an urban hide with three different rifles stabilized on tripods.

Tactically, the Ghost Unit worked in four-man teams that were further broken down into two-man pairs as required. While they answered to their established chain of command, they were given considerable freedom to conduct their mission of providing sniper overwatch at different sectors of the zero line. As they operated in Gaza as part of the larger IDF invasion, they became adept at urban warfare. This included establishing high-rise urban sniper hides, shooting from loopholes, employing designated marksmen within in their capabilities (close-in), and engaging targets at night.

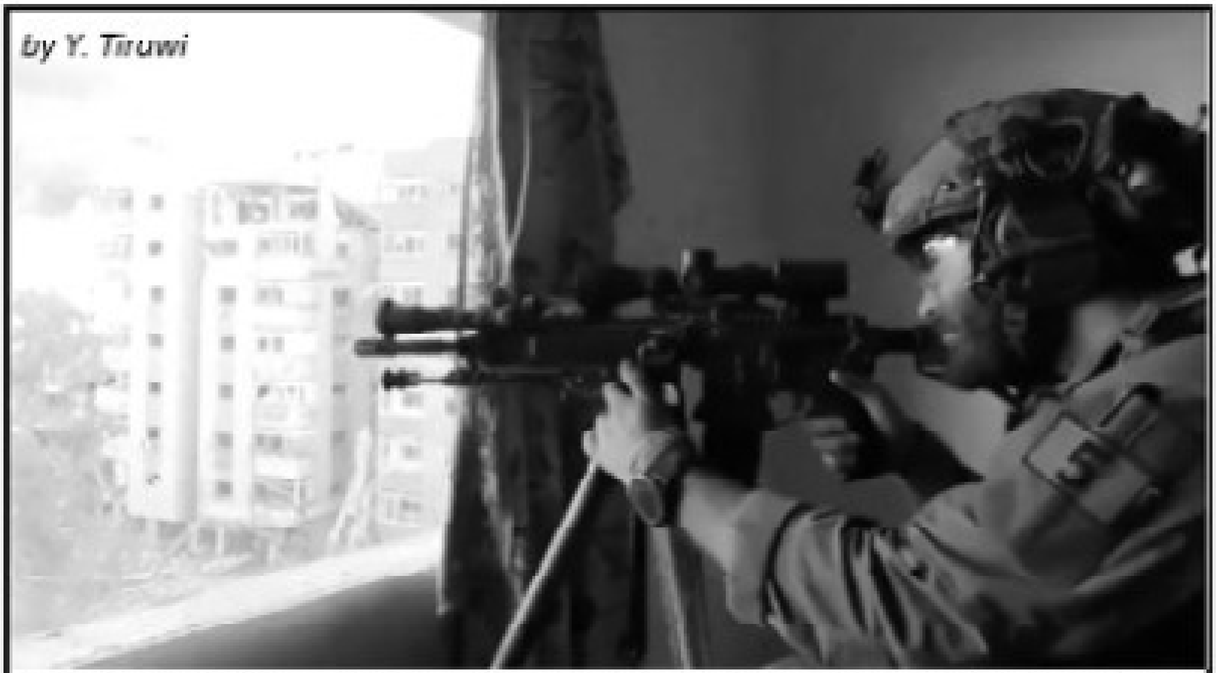
On April 24, 2024, one of the unit's snipers, Shalom Gilbert, posted videos of their operations on You Tube which showed them shooting unarmed Palestinians through the lens of a thermal scope. The unit also posted a video on their Instagram account (@rephaim9) of them shooting an unarmed Palestinian from the distance of 1.26 kilometers in Khan Younis, claiming it was the longest successful sniper shot taken in the war. The unit even tagged the position from where they took the shot from with "1200m X" and posted a video of it. On March 14, 2024, the unit posted a picture of themselves online claiming to have killed 100 terrorists.[91]

One of the Ghost Unit's American snipers, Daniel Raab, later did an interview where he discussed the unit's operations and rules of engagement. He discussed their sniper operations in the Tel Hawwa neighborhood overlooking an area near the Al Quds Hospital. He breaks down a video where his unit shoots an unarmed Palestinian in a street who went to remove the body of another fallen man. Raab said that the IDF's Open Fire Policy (OFP) allowed them to shoot unarmed Palestinians if they were in an off-limits area. Anyone they could see was considered to be a Hamas supporter, such as a lookout or a fighter in civilian clothes, even if they had no weapon, and was thus a legitimate target.

While this might have been considered justified by IDF standards, others thought differently, especially if one of the snipers was a citizen of a different country. In October 2024, the Belgo-Palestinian Association filed an official complaint with the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office against Ghost Unit sniper Alon Ben Sira. The complaint was based on the evidence provided by the journalist Younis Tirawi in his documentary that the Ghost Unit violated international humanitarian law. However, prosecuting the sniper may be difficult since the dual-nationality citizen hasn't lived in Belgium since 2022.[92]

However, this was just the first case of more to come. In April 2025, a similar 240-page complaint was filed against 10 dual-national Britons with Scotland Yard's War Crimes Unit where some were accused of performing as snipers in the Gaza War and illegally killing unarmed Palestinians and aid workers.[93] On July 1, 2025, the FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights) and two other Palestinian advocacy groups filed a complaint with the War Crimes Unit of the Paris Tribunal. They accused two French citizens, Sasha Aknin and Gabriel Ben Haim, of being snipers who committed extrajudicial killings of unarmed Palestinians while serving in the IDF.[94] All these complaints were based on the Tirawi documentary where the evidence came mostly from the social media the snipers themselves posted.

On October 29, 2004, four snipers of the Ghost Unit were killed in Gaza with no other information released by the IDF.[95] One can only hypothesize what might have happened. Many of the pictures and videos posted by the Ghost Unit revealed a lack of basic sniper tradecraft, almost as if they were target shooting. They merely set up in an empty room and aimed their rifles out of a window with no attempt to camouflage their position with netting. It was as if they were unconcerned with anyone shooting back at them. Maybe they came up against a disciplined shooter who wasn't so careless or were targeted by an RPG team.



by Y. Tiruwi

A Ghost Unit sniper with an M-4 on a tripod. Notice how they have no camouflage and their location may be determined based on the nearby landmarks.

Another possibility was that their use of social media may have revealed a pattern or gave away their specific location. This was rather common in the Ukraine war where Russian and Chechen soldiers would post pictures of themselves on social media which revealed their exact locations. The Ukrainians would quickly respond with HIMARS rocket strikes in mere minutes. There are commercial software programs (like Picarta) where you upload a picture and it provides a geolocation with the accuracy depending on how many landmarks are visible. Knowing this, Hamas may have reverse engineered their location to enable an attack. With either of these scenarios, the key element wasn't accurately hitting a target at distance, it was their own discipline as a sniper.

Observations and Trends

Israel has embraced the "designated marksman" role and issued almost every soldier with accurate Western assault rifles, good optics and often a suppressor. This is much different from the war in Ukraine where we see large numbers of Russian infantry with unenhanced "dumb" AK variants with no optics. Israel is also the first country to pursue the "universal sniper" concept by deploying the SMASH fire control system made by Smart Shooter which automatically calculates shooting solutions for the operator. Although the IDF purchased 2,250 of these units in 2018 and employed them in Gaza, we don't have enough data to know how these systems have performed in combat. Notably, the SMASH systems have not been observed on their dedicated sniper rifles.

Israel has made other steps towards more automation in its weapons systems although not at a large scale. For example, the IDF uses drones armed with rifles to target Palestinians but the question remains at what scale will this technology be used in the future or will it remain a niche solution. Israel also has Smart Shooter RCWS (Remote Control Weapon Systems) with automated rifles on its border crossing guard towers which can be used as both a sniper and counter-sniper measure with no risk to the operator. They have also employed these RCWS on their armored vehicles. However, we haven't seen Israel use lightweight portable RCWS with its infantry to provide enhanced protection on the zero line.

In another sign of automation, both the IDF and Hamas have employed small quadcopter drones to enhance their operations, but not in a widespread manner. Israel uses drones to conduct reconnaissance in urban areas to lower the risk to infantryman as seen by the surveillance and identification of Yahya Sinwar. But it is interesting that we haven't seen the proliferation of FPV drones armed with explosives like we see in Ukraine, thus they aren't used as a counter-sniper measure or to replace snipers altogether.

While Hamas generally uses just two sniper platforms, the much older SVD 7.62 mm and the AM-50 .50, Israel's multitude of military and security forces use a wide variety of weapons. Many of these are in smaller calibers like the SR-25 5.56 mm and Remington M24-SWS in 7.62 mm. However, Israel is starting to acquire larger systems like the Barrett MRAD in .300 Winchester Magnum and .338 Lapua Magnum and have used Barrett .50s in smaller numbers for decades. While Hamas likes to use their 12.7 mm and 14.5 mm sniper rifles, we don’t see Israel using these large rifles as much as they may prefer mobility in an urban environment.

The sniper social media war is alive and well in Gaza where both sides publish their sniping attacks although Hamas does it in a more deliberate manner while the Israelis tend to do it at the individual level. Both sides track the deaths of opposing snipers and publish this online when they get confirmation of their demise which is often through official announcements. It is critical that the guerrilla sniper not compromise their identity or location as they will likely be captured or killed by the superior IDF forces. But this is true of the Israeli side as well, to include the complications of multiple investigations into war crimes by their sniper corps.

by Eddie Gerald

An Israeli sniper aims a Remington M24-SWS from the security wall overlooking Gaza (2021). The bolt-action .308 SWS shoots 0.5 MOA at 100 yards.

Bibliography

Books

An Infantry Guide to Combat in Built-Up Areas, FM-91-10-1, Appendix J, Countering Urban Snipers.

A Study of Assassination.

Chuikov, Vasili I., The Battle For Stalingrad, Ballantine Books, New York, 1963.

Cohen, Roger, Hearts Grown Brutal, Random House, New York, 1998.

Collins, Aukai, My Jihad, Pocket Star Books, New York, 2002.

Collins, Eamon, Killing Rage, London: Granta Publications, 1998.

Corrigan, Peter, Soldier U: SAS, Bandit Country, Kent: 22 Books, 1995.

Dillon, Martin, Stone Cold, London: Hutchinson, 1992.

Dillon, Martin, The Trigger Men, Great Britain: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2003.

Dominick, Joseph T., et al, Crime Scene Investigation, London: The Reader’s Digest Association, Inc., 2004.

Edwards, Don A., Large Caliber Sniper Threat To U.S. National Command Authority Figures, Washington, D.C.: The National War College, 1985.

Falk, John, Hello To All That, Picador, New York, 2005.

Fetzer, James H., Murder in Dealey Plaza: What We Know Now that We Didn’t Know Then about the Death of JFK, Chicago: Catfeet Press, 2000.

Furiati, Claudia, ZR Rifle: The Plot To Kill Kennedy And Castro, Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1994.

Geberth, Vernon J., Practical Homicide Investigation: Tactics, Procedures, and Forensic Techniques, Second Edition, Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1993.

Geraghty, Tony, The Irish War-The Hidden Conflict between the IRA and British Intelligence, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

Gilbert, Adrian, Sniper, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1994.

Glenn, Russell W. (editor), Capital Preservation: Preparing for Urban Operations in the Twenty-First Century: Proceedings of the RAND Arroyo-TRAQDOCMCWL- OSD Urban Operations Conference, March 22-23, 2000, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 2001.

Grodon, Robert J, The Killing Of A President: the Complete Photographic Record Of The JSK Assassination, the Conspiracy, And The Cover-Up, New York: Viking Studio Books, 1993.

Harnden, Toby, Bandit Country: The IRA & South Armagh, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999.

Herman, Douglas, The Guns of Dallas, San Diego: Aventine Press, 2005.

Horwitz, Sari, & Ruane, Michael E., Sniper: Inside the Hunt for the Killers Who Terrorized the Nation, Ballantine Books, New York, 2003.

Image Of An Assassination: A New Look At The Zapruder Film, MPI Media Group, 1998.

Kapic, Suada, Guide to Siege of Sarajevo, FAMA, 1996.

Lavergne, Gary M., A Sniper in the Tower, The Charles Whitman Murders, University of North Texas Press, Denton, Tx, 1997.

Lonsdale, Mark V., Sniper Counter-Sniper, Specialized Tactical Training Unit, Los Angeles, CA, 2005.

Maass, Peter, Love Thy Neighbor, Vintage Books, New York, 1996.

MacStiofain, Sean, Memoirs of a Revolutionary, Gordon Cremonisi, 1975.

Mark, Jason, Death of the Leaping Horseman, Leaping Horseman Books, Australia, 2003.

Mark, Jason, Island of Fire, Leaping Horseman Books, Australia, 2006.

Marighella, Carlos, Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla , Paladin Press, Boulder, CO 80301, 1985.

McLean, French L., The Ghetto Men, Schiffer Publishing, Ltd, Atglen, PA, 2001.

Moloney, Ed, A Secret History of the IRA, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002.

Murphy, Paul J., The Wolves of Islam, Russia And The Faces Of Chechen Terror, Brassey's, Inc., Dulles, Virginia, 2004.

Operation Banner: An Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland, England, Ministry of Defense, 2006.

Ottoway, Susan, She Who Dared: Covert Operations in Northern Ireland with the SAS, South Yorkshire: LEO COOPER, 1999.

Paulson, Alan C, et. Al, Silencer History and Performance, Volume One, Sporting and Tactical Silencers, Boulder: Paladin Press, 1996.

Paulson, Alan C, et. Al, Silencer History and Performance, Volume Two, CQB, Assault Rifle, and Sniper Technology, Boulder: Paladin Press, 2002.

Rennie, James, The Operators: On The Streets With Britain's Most Secret Service, South Yorkshire: Pen and Swords Book Limited, 2004.

Roberts, Craig, Kill Zone: A Sniper Looks At Dealey Plaza, Tulsa: Consolidated Press International, 1994.

Roffman, Howard, Presumed Guilty, Associated University Presses, Inc, 1975.

Senich, Peter R., The Complete Book of U.S. Sniping, Boulder: Paladin Press, 1988.

Senich, Peter R., The German Sniper 1914-1945, Boulder: Paladin Press, 1982.

Shlapak, David & Alan Vick, Check Six Begins on the Ground, Monterrey: Rand, 1995.

Simon, Scott, Pretty Birds, Random House, 2005.

Stevens, Donald , et all, Near-Term Options for Improving Security at Los Angeles International Airport, Rand, Monterrey, 2004.

Wacker, Albrecht, Sniper on the Eastern Front, Pen & Sword Military, England, 2005.

Zaitsev, Vassili, Notes Of A Sniper, 2826 Press Inc, Los Angles & Las Vegas, 2003.

Other Publications

Ackerman, Robert K., Echoes of Chechnya Warfare Resound in Moscow, Quantico,
SIGNAL Magazine, May 2000.

Anastasijevic, Dejan, The End of The Sniper War, Death In The Eye, Vreme News Digest Agency No 152, August 22, 1994.

Associated Press, Bosnian Serb General Goes on Trial at Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal for Sarajevo Siege, Published: January 11, 2007

Associated Press, NATO Forces Seize Terrorist Training Camp in Bosnia, February 17, 1996.

Backgrounder on Russian Fuel Air Explosives (“Vacuum Bombs”), Human Rights Watch, February 2000.

Bagrov, Yuri, Chechen Snipers Halt Russian Troops, Associated Press, January
20, 2000.

Blandy, C.W., Chechnya: Two Federal Interventions An Interim Comparison and Assessment, Conflict Studies Research Center, January 2000.

Bochkayev. S., White Pantyhose...Black Widows...What’s Next? The Chechen Times, September 14, 2003.

Bogati, Vjera, Counsel for Bosnian Serb commander describes Sarajevo sniper victims as “accidental victims”. TU No. 253, February 4 - February 9, 2002.

Bunker, Robert J. and Keshavarz, Alma. “Terrorist and Insurgent Teleoperated Sniper Rifles and Machine Guns.” Foreign Military Studies Office, August 2016.

Buying Big Guns? No Big Deal, Gunrunner Buys Rifles In U.S. To Equip Guerrilla Army, www.cbsnews.com, March 20, 2005.

Carroll, Rory, Elusive Sniper Saps US Morale in Baghdad, www.guardian.co.uk, August 5, 2005.

Colucci, Frank, Explosive Ordnance Disposal Robots Outfitted With Weapons, www.nationaldefensemagazine.org, August 2003

Committee or the Collection of Data on Crimes Committed against Humanity

and International Law, Decapitation as a Means of Genocide Over the Serbs in the Former Bosnia and Herzegovina, No.471/95, August 23,1995, Belgrade.

Czech, Kenneth P., Weaponry: Krummer Lauf, www.historynet.com

Foster, Chris, 256th BCT Soldier Survives Sniper Attack, Media release, 256th Brigade Combat Team, Camp Tigerland, Baghdad, Iraq, APO AE 09326, Release 20050705-1, dated July 5, 2005.

Goldman, Adam, Feds foil JFK Terror Plot, Arrest 3, Associated Press.

Gordon, Michael R., Bold Chechen Rebels Fight the Russian Army on Two Fronts, New York Times, January 3, 2000.

Gordon, Michael R., Chechen Rebels Fiercely Attack Russian Forces, January 6, 2000.

Grau, Lester W. & Charles Q. Cutshaw, Russian Snipers In the Mountains and Cities of Chechnya, Infantry Magazine, pages 7-11, Summer 2002.

Harding, Thomas, Iraqi Insurgents Using Austrian Rifles from Iran, www.telegraph.co.uk, February 13, 2007.

Human Rights Watch, October 1994, Vol. 6, No. 15, Bosnia-Hercegovina Sarajevo International Criminal Tribunal Indictment, The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Stanislav Galic, Dragomir Milosevic, Case IT-98-29-I.

Jaber, Hala, The Chilling Toll of Allah’s Sniper, The Sunday Times-World, February 20, 2005, www.timesonline.co.uk.

Jervis, Rick, More Troops Mean More Targets for Snipers in Iraq, USA Today, 24 October 2006.

Koopman, John, Traveling Through the Lunar Landscape - Poor People Line the Road Asking for a Handout, The Chronicle, March 25, 2003.

Lichtblau, Eric and Eric Schmitt, Secret Military Spy Planes Enlisted in Hunt for Sniper, October 16, 2002, www.nytimes.com.

Lowe, Christian, Rooftop Execution: NCIS report provides details of sniper deaths, Marine Corps Times, August 5, 2006.

Mares, Dennis, "Gunshot Detection." U.S. Department of Justice, 2022.

Montgomery, Michael, Face of Mercy, Face of Hate, Minnesota Public Radio.

Mottram, Linda, Russian Casualties Under-Reported, The World Today, January 27, 2000.

NATO Forces Kill Sarajevo Sniper, CNN, February 1, 1996.

Novichkov, N.N., Snegovskiy V.Y., Sokolov A.G., Shvarev V.U. Psycho-physiological Support of Combat Activities of Military Personnel

Quilty, Jim, 'White Ravens': Speaking Through the Silence, www.dailystar.com September 27, 2005.

Reynolds, Maura, Russian Atrocities in Chechnya, Los Angeles Times, Moscow, September 17, 2000.

Russian Armed Forces in the Chechen Conflict: Analysis, Results, Conclusions, Moscow 1995, pg. 42.

Russian General's Body Found, BBC News, January 23, 2000.

Russia Pays Heavily for Gains, The Telegraph, www.viexpo.com

Safrunchek, Ivan, Russia's Experience of Asymmetrical Warfare, Updated November 19, 2002, Center For Defense Information.

Russian Troops' Tales of War, BBC News, January 26, 2000.

Sixbey, Mark, Darkhorse snipers kill insurgent sniper, recover stolen Marine sniper rifle, Marine Corps Times, June 20, 2006.

Snipers Keep Russians Out of Grozny, The Associated Press, Lkhan-Kala, Russia, January 28, 2000.

Speyer, Arthur L., Appendix C: The Two Sides of Grozny, Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, Chechnya: Urban Warfare Lessons Learned.

Suljak, Ante, Seve Practiced by Shooting Civilians in Sarajevo, Foreign Affairs, September 12, 2000.

Thomas, Timothy L, & Charles P. O'Hara, Combat Stress in Chechnya: "The Equal Opportunity Disorder", first published in Army Medical Department Journal Jan- Mar 2000, fmso.leavenwort.army.mil

Traynor, Ian, Fighting Phantoms: The Toll Mounts, Russian Hospitals Bear Witness to the Price Moscow's Army is Paying in Chechnya, The Guardian, December 11, 2001.

United Nations Report, Study of the Battle and Siege of Sarajevo, S/1994/674/Add.2 (Vol. II), 27 May 1994)

Vasic, Milos, The Spiritual State of Siege, September 26, 1994. Vreme News Digest Agency No 157.

Vickland, Bill, Fred Cuny: The Lost American

Vladmirov, Kit, Valor Medal for Dead OMON Sergeant, Saint Petersburg Press #101.

Vogel, Steve, Military Aircraft With Detection Gear To Augment Police, October 16, 2002, www.washingtonpost.com

War in Chechnya - 1999, news archive, www.aeronautics.ru, January 20, 2000.

Wines, Michael, Colonel's Trial Puts Russian Justice to Test, March 8, 2001, www.criminology.fsu.edu

The Author

John West spent a career in the military conducting worldwide special operations and competitive intelligence. He served three tours in Iraq and three tours in Afghanistan before retiring. His most important assignment was as an Unconventional Warfare instructor where he taught Green Beret students many aspects of guerrilla warfare to include urban sniping. The author can be reached at the following business email: admin@gwstrategies.net
Select List of Training Attended:

- Ranger School
- SERE Level C High Risk
- Special Forces Qualification Course (Enlisted & Officer)
- Special Forces Advance Urban Combat Course
- Special Mission Unit CQB & Hostage Rescue Course
- SWAT Sniper School
- Advanced SWAT School
- Close Quarters Battle Tactics
- Precision Rifle Marksmanship Course
- High Risk Warrant & Drug Raid Course
- MP5 Submachine-gun Operator’s Course
- Concealed Carry Pistol Course
- Heckler & Koch’s Armorer’s Course
- Lone Operator’s Course
- Urban Warfare Immersion Program
- Hostage Negotiations
- Al Qaeda & Iranian Terror Operations
- Senior Executives in National & International Security (HKS)
- Harvard National Security Fellowship

1 Falk, *Hello to all That*, p.84.
2 Harnden, *Bandit Country*, p.401.
3 Wacker, *Sniper on the Eastern Front*, p. 126-7.
4 Wacker, *Sniper on the Eastern Front*, p. 127-8.
5 Wacker, *Sniper on the Eastern Front*, p. 96.

6 Zaitsev, *Notes of a Sniper.*, p. 233-245.

7 Senich, *The German Sniper 1914-1945*, p. 283.

8 *Anderson Cooper 360* Blog, October 17, 2006.

9 https://threatpost.com/researchers-manipulate-rifles-precision-targeting-system/114028/

10 The company's email address was defunct as of July 2025.

11 Archive of the Muzei-Panorama Stalingradskoi Bitvy, Volgograd, p. 424/1309.

12 Popov, Petr (ed.), Perelom, Izdatel 2000.

13 Yakovlev, Nikolai, 19 Noyabrya 1942, Molodaya Gvardiya 1979.

14 Craig, *Enemy at the Gates*, p. 121.

15 Craig, *Enemy at the Gates*, p. 122.

16 Chuikov, *The Battle for Stalingrad*, p. 155.

17 Wijers, Hans J., *The Battle for Stalingrad: The Battle for the Factories.*

18 *Mark, Death of the Leaping Horsemen,* p. 326.

19 Chuikov, *The Battle for Stalingrad,* p. 130.

20 Archive of the Muzei-Panorama Stalingradskoi Bitvy, Volgograd, p. 862/7294.

21 Craig, *Enemy at the Gates*, p. 139-40.

22 Mark, *Island of Fire*, p.309.

23 Mark, *Island of Fire*, p.165.

24 Mark, *Island of Fire*, p.197.

25 Mark, *Island of Fire*, p.304.

26 Beevor, *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege*, 205.

27 Craig, *Enemy at the Gates*, p. 235-36.

28 Mark, *Island of Fire*, p. 50-51.

29 Zaitsev, *Notes Of A Sniper,* p.154.

30 Zaitsev, *Notes Of A Sniper*, p.179-80.

31 Beevor, *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege*, 205.

32 Craig, *Enemy at the Gates*, p. 145-6.

33 Holl, *An Infantryman in Stalingrad*, p.61-63.

34 Holl, *An Infantryman in Stalingrad*, p.113.

35 Zaitsev, *Notes Of A Sniper,* p.236-7.

36 Zaitsev, *Notes Of A Sniper,* p. 234.

37 news.bbc.co.uk, 1943, *Germans Surrender at Stalingrad*

38 https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/ukraine-helped-syrian-rebels-deliver-blow-russia

39 Katchanovski, Ivan. "The 'Snipers' Massacre' on the Maidan in Ukraine." University of Ottawa, September 2015.

40 "Snipers at Maidan: The untold story of a massacre in Ukraine." BBC Newsnight, 2015.

41 Katchanovski.

42 Ibid.

43 Nahaylo, Bohdan. "Unsolved Maidan massacre casts shadow over Ukraine." Atlantic Council, February 18, 2020.

44 "MP Kupriy was outraged why only Poroshenko can buy weapons in Ukraine." Kopotko, August 31, 2017.

45 Interview with Ruslan Shpakovych. Euromaidan Press, August 2, 2022.

46 The overall quality of training was such that Ukraine only lost three snipers in the Donbas from 2017-2019. "Training in the war." Gazeta.ua, August 3, 2019.

47 WM: Winchester Magnum, LM: Lapua Magnum, CT: Chey Tac.

48 "Ukrainian Intelligence: 50 Russian snipers currently operate in Donbas." UAWIRE, March 1, 2021.

[49] It was widely claimed (falsely) that Wali was the sniper who made a 3.5 km shot in 2017 against ISIS soldiers in Mosul, Iraq.
[50] https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/05/2023/646dcc099a79478ef157061b
[51] https://ualosses.org/en/soldiers/
[52] The Russians lost so many men that the Ukrainians thought they were drugged and started calling them “orcs” because they acted like zombies.
[53] Amalaraj, Perkin. “The Ghost of Bakhmut.” Daily Mail, October 2, 2023.
[54] Matvienko, Alexander. “The longest shot in the world.” Focus, May 12, 2023.
[55] Field interview at a Battalion HQ.
[56] Field interview with a sniper team.
[57] Wire-guided fiber optic drones are becoming more common.
[58] https://theins.ru/inv/276989
[59] Ibid.
[60] “Russia names second Ukrainian suspect in killing of nationalist’s daughter.” Reuters, August 29, 2022.
[61] https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/13/russias-top-missile-expert-gunned-down-in-moscow-park
[62] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67641500
[63] https://tass.com/society/1889031
[64] https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/07/17/i-cant-erase-all-blood-my-mind/palestinian-armed-groups-october-7-assault-israel
[65] While five Palestinian groups were confirmed to have conducted the 2023 attack, I will refer to just Hamas for simplicity.
[66] There are many videos of Israeli soldiers doing just this with no sense of their own personal security.
[67] A Hamas video posted online revealed these very tactics.
[68] From 2015-2021, the Egyptian military discovered and destroyed over 3,000 illegal tunnels dug along their 7.5 mile (12 km) border with Gaza.
[69] https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/11/middleeast/hamas-weaponry-gaza-israel-palestine-unrest-intl-hnk-ml
[70] https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/02/06/chinese-weapons-with-the-qassam-brigades-facing-israel/
[71] Element Optics was created in 2020 as an offshoot of FX Airguns.
[72] By 2015, the Syrian army was making their own local copies called the Golan S-01.
[73] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1542559/Iraqi-insurgents-using-Austrian-rifles-from-Iran.html
[74] It is likely Iran did transfer this engineering data to Hamas but they were unable to replicate the process and could only do repairs to existing systems.
[75] https://www.alestiklal.net/en/article/outperforming-austrian-and-russian-sniper-rifles-unveiling-the-secrets-of-al-qassam-s-ghoul
[76] Forgotten Weapons
[77] Some have hypothesized that Hamas imports rifle kits that require some manufacturing or that they have a real manufacturing capability not displayed here that makes better products and this was just infotainment.
[78] Hamas wants the viewer to think they hit the Israeli sniper, but you could see their barrel moving in the loophole afterwards, probably trying to locate where the Hamas gunman fired from.
[79] The policeman was Barel Hadaria Shmueli, 21 years old.

[80] The original Rugers were modified by the Italian gun company Sabatti which also makes a full line of sniping rifles as well.
[81] https://www.btselem.org/statistics/first_intifada_tables
[82] https://imeu.org/article/25th-anniversary-of-the-first-intifada
[83] Levinson, Chaim. “IDF Still Using Banned Weapon Against Civilian Protestors.” Haaretz, September 19, 2010.
[84] Ibid.
[85] https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20100927
[86] Human Rights Council Report February 25, 2019.
[87] OG = Original Gangster
[88] Diamond, Jeremy and Zeena Saifi. “Israeli chief pathologist tells CNN Sinwar killed by bullet to the head.” CNN, October 18, 2024.
[89] Israeli troops also talked online about one of their snipers shooting Sinwar.
[90] Vanderlip, Sami. “U.S. Nonprofit Raised $300,00 for Israeli Sniper Unit Associated With Killings of Unarmed Palestinians.” December 11, 2024.
[91] Younis Tirawi & Sami Vanderlip documentary.
[92] Sente, Arthur. “Ucclois implicated as a sniper in Gaza: Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office opens investigation for “war crimes.” Le Soire, October 17, 2024.
[93] “Ten Britons accused of committing war crimes while fighting for Israel in Gaza.” The Guardian, April 7, 2025.
[94] https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/france/summary-executions-in-gaza-complaints-filed-against-dual-national
[95] “Gaza resistance kills four Israeli soldiers from ‘elite’ sniper unit.” The Cradle, October 29, 2024.

Table of Contents

Foreword1

1. Sniper at Work4
2. Urban Guerrilla Sniping17
3. Shoot to Thrill32
4. Tools of the Trade54
5. Snipercraft78
6.

The Sound of Silence107
7.
Asymmetric Sniping124
8.
Countering the Urban Sniper148
9.
Sniper Forensics176
10.
Sniper Technology198
11.
Martyr’s Square220
12.
Invisible Death 240
13.
The Dealey Plaza Snipers258
14.
Terror in Texas284
15.
The Troubles298
16.
Fry the Brain321
17.
The Chechen Wolves354
18.
The DC Snipers375
19.
Juba: The Baghdad Sniper394
20.
The Syrian Civil War413

21.
Ukraine Update434
22.
The Gaza War454
Bibliography.474
About the author480

This file was downloaded from Z-Library project

Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.

z-library.sk z-lib.gs z-lib.fm go-to-library.sk

Official Telegram channel

Z-Access

https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library